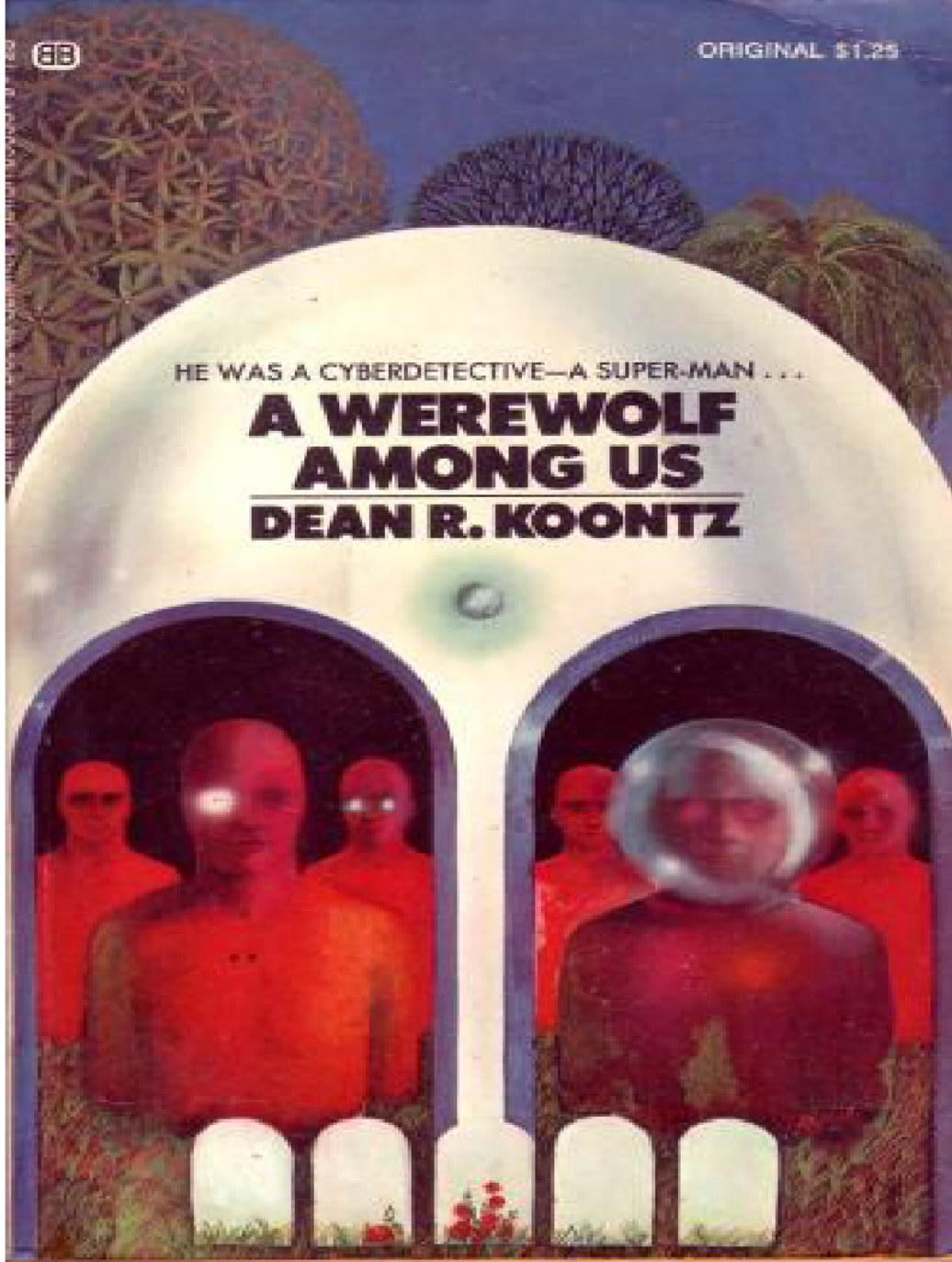


HE WAS A CYBERDETECTIVE—A SUPER-MAN . . .

A WEREWOLF AMONG US

DEAN R. KOONTZ



A Werewolf Among Us

by

Dean R. Koontz

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ONE: *A Case Begun*

Morbidly curious, the squint-eyed customs official examined the two holes in Baker St. Cyr's chest. He touched the flange of warm, yellow plastic that rimmed each of the female jacks, and he tried to determine how the flesh had been coerced into growing onto the foreign material.

St. Cyr would not have been surprised if the man had sent for a flashlight and begun a detailed visual inspection of those two narrow tunnels in St. Cyr's flesh. On a world as serene as Dharma, largely given over to the sport of the wealthy, a customs chief would rarely encounter anything unusual; therefore, when one of the four baggage inspectors had turned up an odd piece of machinery in St. Cyr's smallest suitcase, the chief intended, understandably enough, to milk the incident for all its entertainment value.

"Shall we get on with it?" St. Cyr asked.

The customs chief grunted and straightened from his stoop. He turned to the open suitcase on the table beside them and patted the turtle shell, which was not a turtle shell at all.

He said, "Let's see you put it on."

The baggage inspector, a young man with a mop of yellow hair and skin as white as dusting powder, came forward to have a better look. He had found the turtle shell machine, after all. He deserved to share in the demonstration.

St. Cyr, with the gentle familiarity a man might exhibit toward a woman who was a cherished lover, lifted the turtle shell. He turned it on its back, leaned over it and inserted the two male jacks which trailed from it into the pair of plugs on his chest.

The customs chief said, "Well, well."

The dusting powder boy looked ill.

Smiling, St. Cyr lifted the shell and pressed it against his chest, letting the wires slowly retreat into the machine. The shell had been carefully molded to fit his torso and was nowhere more than four inches thick. Now that it was in place, it was hardly distinguishable as a separate entity. "Has it—taken you over yet?" the boy asked.

Patiently, St. Cyr explained that the computer half of his investigatory symbiosis did not "take over" when he was joined with it. "A cyberdetective is part man and part computer, meshed as completely as the two can ever be. The highly microminiaturized components of the bio-computer can recall and relate bits of data in a perfectly mathematical, logical manner that a human mind could never easily grasp, while the human half of the symbiote provides a perception of emotions and emotional motivations that the bio-computer—in its crisp, clean, mathematical universe—could never begin to comprehend. Together, we make a precise and thorough detective unit."

"Well, anyway..." The boy looked at the shell again. "Is it—*inside* you yet?"

St. Cyr pointed to a smooth, white palm switch on the base of the bio-computer shell, depressed it. Instantly, the computer injected chemical-cohesive filaments into his flesh and painlessly tapped his spinal column and various conglomerates of nerves far more intimately than it could through the two plugs in his chest.

"Now?" the customs chief asked.

St. Cyr nodded.

"You don't look any different." The chief squinted again, as if he expected to catch a quick glimpse of something monstrous behind the eyes of the newly-formed symbiote.

"It doesn't make any noticeable change in me," St. Cyr told him. "On the contrary, *you* are the one transformed."

The customs chief looked quickly down at himself, uncomprehending. He wiggled his fingers, as if he were afraid they might melt, mingle and become something else altogether.

St. Cyr laughed. "I meant, in my eyes you've been transformed. I see you more clearly and understand your motives more completely than before. The bio-computer improves my perceptions and my analysis of what I sense."

For a moment, as the spinal contacts were being completed and the computer was blending with his own mental functions, he had hallucinated dark shapes that crept from the interior of his mind, hideously ugly beasts that swooped up suddenly, fanged and clawed and wild-eyed. But they passed, as they always did. Now he marveled at the new relationships he saw in everything around him.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked.

The chief nodded. "You can take it off now."

St. Cyr realized that not only backworld curiosity possessed the customs official, but that he was also motivated by an intense jealousy of St. Cyr's role in life—and bitterness that his own had turned out, by comparison, so bland.

"I might as well wear it from here on," St. Cyr said. He picked up his shirt, slipped into it and zipped the front. It was a tight fit now.

"How long do you wear it each day?" the boy asked.

"When I'm on a case, I wear it twenty-four hours a day."

"Even when you sleep?"

"Yes," St. Cyr said, slipping into his jacket, then closing the empty case in which the bio-computer rested. "Even when you sleep, you sense the world around you, and the bio-computer helps you to keep from missing anything. It even interprets my dreams, like a mechanical David."

The boy tried to discern the machine's lines where it blended with St. Cyr's under the clothes. St. Cyr looked like nothing more than a barrel-chested man. "Aren't you afraid of sleeping while it's—inside you?"

"Why should I be? It's only a computer, a machine, robot. Robots can't hurt you. The Laws of Robotics prove that, don't they?"

Though he knew the truth of that, the boy shivered and turned away, left

the room.

"Be afraid of men," St. Cyr told the customs chief.

"Men can never be trusted. But a machine is always an ally; it's built to be."

The chief said, "We're finished; you may go. Sorry to inconvenience you."

Ten minutes later, Baker St. Cyr strolled along the main promenade in front of the terminal, enjoying the view of rolling green hills on the resort planet's most hospitable continent. He breathed in the air—free of pollutants and a welcome change from New Chicago, the industrial planet to which his last case had taken him—and looked around, hoping to spot someone who might be there waiting for him.

While he was looking to his right, a voice on his left said, "Are you Mr. St. Cyr?"

The voice was that of a handsome, fair-haired, earnest young boy. When St. Cyr turned, however, he was confronted by a master unit robot as large as he was and at least twice again his weight. It floated on grav-plates, silent. Of course, he thought, the Alderbans would have the very best in modern conveniences, no matter what the cost.

"I'm St.Cyr," he said.

"I am Teddy, the Alderban master unit, and I've come to escort you to the estate." How perfect he would have been in tie and tails.

Teddy, St. Cyr mused. A master unit *was* almost human, after all. It had been programmed with a distinct personality—always pleasant and efficient—by the Reiss Master Unit Corporation of Ionus. Such a machine was a far more companionable associate than a dog; and men gave names to dogs.

St. Cyr smiled, aware that Teddy could interpret facial expressions. "Hello, Teddy. I'm most anxious to be going."

"I'll take your bags, Mr. St. Cyr."

The master unit extended steel arms from his cylindrical body trunk and gathered the suitcases in thin, ball-jointed fingers. He led the way to the promenade steps, down the concrete approach ramp to a sleek, silver ground car, placed the bags in the trunk and opened St. Cyr's door. When the man was seated, he closed the door and floated around to the other side of the vehicle, where he opened a second door and drifted into the cushionless niche constructed especially for him. With his highly flexible fingers he plugged the steering, braking and acceleration leads into three of the nine sockets that ringed the middle of his body trunk. He drove the car, without hands, from the parking lot onto a wide superhighway, heading away from the lossely architected sprawl of the city.

For a while, St. Cyr watched the hills pass by. Stands of pine-like trees thrust up like grasping hands before them, loomed over, fell away in a collapse of green fingers. A dear, blue-green river played quick tag with the road for the first fifty miles, then curved abruptly away, down a rock-walled valley, and never returned.

Darma, with its abnormally broad and agreeable equatorial belt, its already good weather improved considerably by Climkon's manipulation of its atmosphere, was idyllic. It was the sort of world to which every man dreamed of retiring as early in life as possible. Few, however, could ever afford to leave their industrial, business-oriented home worlds. Planets like Darma, untouched by the noise, smoke and stench of production, were not developed for the poor or for the well-to-do, but only for the extremely wealthy. Only the richest men could afford to live here permanently, and only the very comfortable could manage even a month-long visit. St. Cyr, then, should have been mesmerized by the vast stretches of untrammelled land, grateful for the chance to breathe such sweet air.

He wasn't.

He was, in fact, bored by it.

Boredom was the major enemy that St. Cyr faced, despite the criminals and potential criminals around whom his profession revolved. Tedium was a backwards-leading road that wound through the tumble-down structures of old memories—memories of times before he had become a cyberdetective, memories of people he would rather forget, of involvements he would just as soon not recall...

He turned to Teddy and said, "You know, of course, why I'm here." He had decided to begin work, even if his first interview had to be with a master unit robot.

"Yes, sir," Teddy said. "To investigate the murders."

"That's correct"

"A nasty business, sir."

"Murder always is, Teddy."

"You require my assistance?"

"I want to hear the general story of the murders."

"You haven't been informed, sir?"

"Yes, I have been. But I would like your version, one that isn't cluttered with emotion."

"I see," Teddy said. He did not swivel the cannister of his "head" or direct the soft, green discs of his sight receptors toward the detective.

"Go on, then."

The robot paused a moment, then spoke, still with the same voice of a boy almost but not quite grown to manhood, a charming and winning voice. St. Cyr could not even catch the switch between word tapes as the machine constructed its sentences.

The first murder occurred four weeks ago, on a Monday morning—Darma has a seven-day week, the same as Earth, though the year contains only forty-eight weeks. The day was pleasant—or, at least, enough of the criteria for a pleasant day were present: cloudless sky, moderate temperatures, little wind. Does that sound like a pleasant day, sir?"

"Yes," St. Cyr said. "Go on. I'll understand that any further value

judgments you make are based on a comparison of the events with established standards."

Teddy continued. "The family rose as usual, all except Leon, the oldest boy. When he did not appear at breakfast, the family assumed that he was sleeping in. The Alderbans, due to their wealth, pursue artistic lives and do not, therefore, need to observe a strict routine. Leon's absence, therefore, aroused little if any concern."

The highway began to climb into large, gray mountains where filmy sheets of mist curled through the trees that now grew thickly on both sides.

"When Leon did not appear by noon, his sister Dorothea looked in on him and discovered his corpse. He was lying near the door, his arms outstretched as if he had been trying to crawl to the door and summon help. His throat had been torn out."

"*Not cut with a blade?*"

"Torn," Teddy said again. "It was a ragged mess. Also, his right arm had very nearly been ripped free of its shoulder socket; blood lay everywhere."

"The authorities?" St. Cyr asked.

He felt a quickening excitement as he considered how such a corpse could have come to its condition. The boredom receded and left him altogether. In the back of his mind, held against a cold black slateboard, was an image of the body. He shivered. He wished the board were the sort he could erase; but his bio-computer partner held the image there, adding to it bit by bit as more pieces of the puzzle were detailed by the master unit.

"The Darmanian police arrived, federal men sent in because of the Alderban name and position. They dusted for fingerprints on every surface in Leon's bedroom. They super-lighted the body, trying to bring out the killer's prints from the background of Leon's own skin patterns. They checked beneath his nails for skin, since he appeared to have fought his assailant, and they thoroughly vacuumed the room for traces of dust, string and hair that might be alien to it. All the laboratory tests failed to produce a single clue. The police were baffled, for such a thorough scanning of a murder scene and corpse had never failed to bring results in the past."

St. Cyr watched the trees, the mist, the bare peaks of the mountains through which they glided. He saw something sinister in them which he had not noticed earlier, though he could not pin down the exact nature of his misgivings. What sort of creature walked beneath trees such as these, through this mist, within sight of such mountains, able to slaughter in such a brutal fashion?

A psychopath, the bio-computer informed him voicelessly. It would not tolerate such a burst of emotionalism without a counter-balancing touch of realism. *A psychopath, nothing more.*

"The second killing?" St. Cyr asked.

"One week later, the following Monday, Dorothea went for a walk in the vast gardens of the Alderban estate. The gardens stretch for two miles east-west and one mile north-south; they offer many an inspiring view to a poet like Dorothea. When she did not return from her walk at the time she said she

would, the family was immediately alarmed. A search of the gardens was initiated. This time, I found the body."

The pines had given out in these higher altitudes to huge, gray-leaved trees that bent across the lanes until, almost touching above the median, they formed a dark tunnel.

The car's lights popped on.

Teddy said, "Dorothea had been mauled exactly as her brother had been, her throat torn through. Her left hip had also been badly mutilated, and the toes of her right foot were gone."

"Gone?"

"At least, they've never been found, sir."

Another car passed them, going toward the city they had left behind, a silvery master unit chauffeuring a young couple. The girl was a pretty brunette.

St. Cyr: "The police were summoned again?"

Teddy: "Yes. The federal men arrived and proceeded to cover the murder scene just as thoroughly as they had done before. They super-lighted the body for fingerprints and found none. They dug under her nails for flesh—found none. They searched the garden for footprints—found none. In one area, however, they had success."

"What was that?" St. Cyr asked. Jubal Alderban, the patriarch of this troubled family, had not told him any of these fascinating details in the light-telegram he had sent, and St. Cyr was desperate for facts.

"They found a wolf's hair in the wound on her neck."

St. Cyr: "Well, there you have it A wolf—"

"Not quite, sir. This could possibly explain Dorothea's death—though there has not been a wild wolf reported on this continent for nearly sixty years, an extinction of species specified in Climicon's plans for Darma—but it most assuredly does not explain Leon's demise. How, for instance, could a wolf get through the door locks, find its way upstairs to Leon's room, kill him, and leave without otherwise causing a disturbance?"

St. Cyr could not explain that.

"Wolves, Mr. St. Cyr, are apt to howl when excited. In the act of chewing and clawing Leon's throat, it would surely have awakened the household or at least drawn my own notice. There was no noise. And when I checked the lock systems, I found them inviolate; the doors had not been opened all night."

"Who is left in the family?" St. Cyr asked. He wished they would come out of the canopy of gray trees and into the sunlight again.

"Five," Teddy said. "There is Jubal Alderban, father of the family and owner of the Alderban Interstellar Corporation, though he has never worked much at the family business. It's nearly all in the hands of trust lawyers, who dole out large monthly allotments to the family. Jubal is a sculptor of galactic renown, as you most likely know. He, as did all the family, underwent psychiatric hypno-keying to stimulate his creative abilities."

They drifted into sunlight again, squinted as the windshield splashed orange and then quickly opaqued in adjustment to the glare. The mountains hung over them again, rotten teeth ready to bite. Then the trees formed another canopy and brought darkness.

"Jubal's wife," Teddy said, "is Alicia. Ten years younger than Jubal, forty-four, an accomplished classical guitarist and composer of ballads in the Spanish tradition. The three remaining children are Dane, the historical novelist, Betty, a better poet than her dead sister, and Tina—who paints. Tina is the most self-sufficient of the lot, Dane the least. Jubal is, of course, concerned about their welfare."

St. Cyr phrased his next question carefully in order to obtain the most, clinical, factual and complete answer that Teddy could give him. "Having observed most of this firsthand, having seen the bodies and known the victims, do you have any theories of your own?" He knew that a Reiss Master Unit was a complete reasoning individual, within certain limits, and he hoped the superior logic of that mind would have some new insight that the police had not come up with.

He was disappointed.

"Nothing of *my* own, sir. It is truly baffling. There is only what the natives say about it."

"Native Darmanians?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do they say, Teddy?"

"Werewolf, sir."

"Pardon me?"

"I know that it sounds absurd to reasoning creatures like ourselves. The Darmanians say that a werewolf, a creature they call the *du-aga-klava*, inhabits the hills at the foot of the mountains. The natives are convinced that one of these *du-aga-klava* has bitten some member of the family, thus transmitting its lycanthropy. That member of the family, by this theory, is the murderer of Leon and Dorothea Alderban."

"As you said, that doesn't really satisfy anyone with the ability to reason clearly."

Teddy said nothing more.

"I noticed," St. Cyr said, "that your tone of voice has been deliberately chosen to indicate doubt. Why is that?"

The car seemed to accelerate slightly, though the detective could not be certain of that. And if he could be certain, what would such a reaction on Teddy's part mean?

"It is not superstitious, Mr. St. Cyr, to believe that there are more things beyond our understanding than we would admit."

"I suppose."

Something here... The bio-computer part of him was disturbed. It had analyzed what the robot had told it—not merely what the robot had said, but

how it had said h. It had dissected grammar and inflection, and now it was displeased.

Something there is here... The master unit's words seem designed to conceal. They are not natural to it. It is almost as if someone had gotten to the robot and programmed it to answer this way, programmed it to emphasize the werewolf stories.

But who, St. Cyr wondered, would Teddy be unwittingly trying to protect? Who could have programmed him to slant his story toward the supernatural?

Something there is here...

But, for the time being anyway, St. Cyr was willing to ignore the warning signals. The boredom had been driven out, and that was what counted the most. With his mind occupied, he would not find himself remembering odd moments of the past without really wanting to. And if he did not remember them, he would not be sad. He hated being sad. Thank God for work, for corpses with their throats torn out, for mysteries.

They broke through the mountains and started down the foothills on the other side. For a moment, the sun shone through the break in the ubiquitous trees—then the dark branches and gray leaves enfolded the car once more.

TWO: *Rider in the Storm*

The Alderban mansion was built on the slopes of the last of the major foothills, in the shadows of the gray mountains. In five distinct steps, each fitted against the contour of the land, perfectly smooth and unseamed as if it had been carved from a single piece of blazing white stone, the house managed to appear more like a natural outcropping of the landscape than like the intruding hand of civilization.

Teddy piloted the ground car into the iris-ing mouth of the garage and parked it in a stall alongside five similar vehicles.

"I'll show you to your room," he said.

Five minutes later, by means of an elevator that moved both vertically and horizontally by turns, they reached the main hall of the topmost level of the house: deep carpet the color of untainted seawater; muted blue walls; indirect lighting, so indirect that he could not locate the source; paintings on both walls, all rather interesting at a glance, all signed by Tina Alderban; music, almost inaudible, gentle and soothing.

Teddy palmed a wall switch, opened the door that appeared behind a sliding panel and showed the detective to his quarters: a comfortably furnished sitting room, a bedroom with a mammoth waterbed and a fireplace large enough to roast an ox, more of Tina Alderban's paintings, a private bath off the bedchamber complete with a Brobdingnagian sunken tub.

"Will this do?" Teddy asked.

"I'll try it for a day or so and see," St. Cyr said dryly. But his sarcasm was lost on the master unit.

"If it doesn't suit, I am sure that something else can be arranged." Teddy floated to the door, turned and said, "Dinner will be served in two hours and twenty minutes, in the main dining room. You will find directions in the house guide in the top drawer of your nightstand."

"Wait." St. Cyr said. "I'd like to talk to Mr. Alderban to get—"

"That will come later," Teddy assured him. "Now, Mr. Alderban wishes that you rest from your journey."

"I'm not tired, actually."

"Then you may watch the thunderstorm, Mr. St. Cyr. Climicon has scheduled one for approximately six o'clock. It should already have begun to form."

This time, when the robot assumed its air of dismissal, it was utterly inarguable. The door closed behind it; beyond the door, the concealing panel slid down the wall.

St. Cyr, unable to imagine what else he should do to pass the time, afraid of growing bored again, went to the glass patio doors and discovered that they opened on *vocal* command. He stepped onto the slate-floored balcony, which was shielded from the elements by the slanted, spout-flanked, red-shingled

roof. Below, a lush valley opened like the center of a flower, cut through by a blue stream of water, spotted with stands of pines and, now and again, a copse of gray-leafed trees.

Above the valley was the storm.

A towering bank of thunderheads had moved stolidly out of the east, black as a carboned anvil. A dozen quick, silvery Eyes of Climicon darted in and out of the dense clouds, drawing them forward with clever atmospheric chemistry.

The thunderheads moved as fast as a freight train, across rails of air on wheels of vapor.

St. Cyr pulled a chair to the railing and sat down, intrigued.

Over the roof of the house, moving in from the mountains behind, a second storm front tagged after and sometimes swept across the spherical Eyes, bearing down on the deep evil of the thunderheads. This massive cloud formation was a softer color, more gray than black, more blue than purple.

At ground level the wind had subsided, though it was clearly still a power at higher altitudes as it jammed the two centers of atmospheric disturbance into the area above the valley.

St. Cyr realized that, in an incredibly small area, the wind appeared to be blowing from two entirely different directions, evidenced by the opposite line of drive behind each front. He supposed this was a relatively minor feat for Climicon on a planet where costs were no object. After all, in recent years they had graduated from weather control to complete terraforming of worlds once unsuitable for human settlements.

Lightning forked between the behemoths overhead.

A moment later, thunder cracked down the valley, a thermal whip that brought an auditory punishment.

Across the valley, in the foothills at the ankles of the next spine of gray mountains, sheets of rain obscured the trees, sliced quick gulleys in the exposed earth, and gushed forward toward the stream below.

And out of those fluttering curtains of rain rode a man on horseback, bent low over his mount's neck, slapping its shoulders with his free hand. He dug his knees into the beast's sides, as if he were riding without benefit of a saddle, but he seemed in no danger of falling off.

St. Cyr stood, now oblivious of the storm except as it was a backdrop to the rider. The approaching figure carried with it an air, a mood, that somehow made him uneasy—something he had noticed with the aid of the bio-computer but which he was as yet unable to pin down and define.

The rain lashed at the rider's back, pushed by the winds, which had once again kissed the earth. Yet he managed to remain ahead of the worst of it, still slapping his mount's neck and shoulders, still bent low so as to be almost a part of the four-legged creature under him.

As the rider drew nearer, taking the slopes of the valley toward the lowest step of the Alderban house, St. Cyr saw that he carried a rifle strapped across his broad back, Slung across the shoulders of the horse were two objects: a

saddlebag made of dark leather—and a pair of bloody boar's heads, which dripped crimson and glared out at the passing world with bared fangs and rigor-mortised snarls.

The man took the last hundred yards toward the swiftly irisng doors of the stables, and as he drew close to St. Cyr's position, the cyberdetective saw tangled black hair, a broad and Slavic face, fierce dark eyes. The hand that slapped the horse, urging it on, was as large as a dinner plate and looked, consequently, too large to eat with. Beneath the tight-fitting black shirt, muscles bulged and twisted as if they were sentient creatures in their own right.

The hunter was laughing, heedless of the blood that splattered over his trousers from the dangling boars' heads, unconcerned about the lightning that chattered down to the earth all across the valley. The only thing in the world, at that moment for that large dark man, was the race. And he was laughing at the elements because he knew that he had won it.

He disappeared through the stable door.

The door winked shut.

And the storm broke over the house with the force of a small hurricane, almost taking St. Cyr off his feet as he staggered back into the safety of his quarters.

Inside, he listened to the rain and the pea-sized hailstones as the deluge battered the roof and snapped against the patio doors. Curiously, its fury seemed pale now. He had watched the hunter defeat it; the hunter was now more charged, more fiercely powerful than any storm.

Only a man, the bio-computer said, without speaking.

But who had he been? The laughing giant, bringing home two bloody pig heads as trophies, did not fit any of the descriptions of members of the Alderban family that he had obtained from his own reliable sources before setting out for Darma, and certainly not with anything that Teddy had told him. It was evident to St. Cyr that the hunter had never undergone psychiatric hypno-keying to stimulate *his* creativity. He was elemental. He was blood, the fight, the stalk, rain and fire. He was positively no historical novelist like Dane, no sculptor like Jubal.

St. Cyr walked to the communications board in the wall by his bed and called the house computer.

"May I be of service?" a voice asked overhead.

"I wish to speak to Teddy," he said.

A moment later the master unit was on the line. "Yes, Mr. St. Cyr?"

"I asked you who all was in the family, and you did not tell me everything."

"Whom did I miss?" Teddy asked, concerned. He would be running a check of his own systems even as he spoke, searching for a faulty memory cell.

"The big man with black hair and eyes. He was out hunting just now."

"You mean Hirschel," Teddy said, as relieved as a robot could be.

"Who is he?"

"Hirschel is Jubal Alderban's uncle on his father's side of the family."

"He lives here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you mention him before?"

The master unit said, "I suppose because of the way you asked the question. You wanted to know who was in the family. To that, I am programmed to reply as I did. If you had asked who was in the *household*, I would have told you about Hirschel."

It was possible, St. Cyr thought, that the master unit had been given a narrow definition of the word "family" and that the restricted use he was permitted for that term had made it impossible for him to mention Hirschel. He really did not know enough about Reiss Master Units to be certain. His bio-computer assured him that, while most robotic servants should be equipped for cross-reference and broad spectrum recall, such a likelihood as this was not that improbable. Yet, emotionally, he could not escape the notion that Teddy had been trying to hide Hirschel's presence as long as he could.

To what end?

"Anything else, Mr. St. Cyr?"

"No, Teddy," he said at last. He broke the connection.

St. Cyr showered, still wearing the turtle-shell machine, and lay down for a while before getting dressed for supper. He worked at the pieces of hay, cleared away a section of the stack but still could not find any needle. Reminding himself that the nap would have to be short and relying on the bio-computer to wake him, he fell asleep.

The dream was about a man wearing a boar's head mask. The man was leading him along a road where the pavement was broken, jutting up in great slabs much higher than a man. Around them, the tottering buildings, filmed in gray smoke, leaned over the street, skewed out of square and ready to topple. When he woke from it an hour later, he was drenched in perspiration and felt as if the greasy smoke that layered the dead buildings now wrapped him in a dark, buttery sheath. The sheets were twisted around his legs. The pillowcase was sodden.

While he showered and dressed, the bio-computer explained a few things about his dream.

The man in the boar's head mask: THE UNKNOWN.

The damaged road: THE PAST.

The tottering buildings: MEMORIES BEST LEFT BURIED.

The reason you woke without letting it continue further: FEAR OF WHERE THE ROAD WOULD END.

St. Cyr hated these dream analyses, but he could not do anything to dissuade the bio-computer, which contributed what it deemed important whether he wished to hear from it or not. He refused to consider what it said. He was a detective. A detective did not have to investigate himself.

In the top drawer of the nightstand he found the house guide—fifty pages of closely-packed information and ten pages of detailed maps. He located the main dining room, traced a path backwards to his own quarters, which were marked in red. Satisfied that he knew the way, a bit amazed that even the wealthiest families would require a house this size, he went downstairs to meet the suspects.

THREE: *Suspects*

Seven limited-response mechanicals rolled out of the wide kitchen doorway, two abreast except for their gleaming leader, Jubal's personal waiter, who preceded them by ten feet. They split into two columns at the head of the table, precisely as they had done at the start of each of the many courses of the dinner, and, in a moment, stationed themselves beside and to the left of their respective masters. The long table was alabaster. The dishes were black. The silverware was silver. Simultaneously reaching into their seven identical body-trunk storage compartments, the robots placed clear, crystal dishes, filled with bright crimson fruit, on the small black plates before the diners. White, black, red, and the gleam of silver... As if satisfied by the simplicity of the setting and the color scheme, the mindless mechanicals turned as a single unit and retraced their path back to the kitchen, the door hissing shut behind the last of them.

"This is a native fruit," Jubal said, using a long-handled, tiny-bowled silver spoon to scoop up a chunk of it. "It grows on trees in a shell, much like a coconut, but it tastes like a combination of watermelon and blackberries."

It was quite good, juicy and sweet.

They finished dessert in silence and retired to the main drawing room for after-dinner liqueurs, while the mechanicals cleaned up the dirty dishes behind them. At first, through the soup and the meat courses, everyone had been talkative, though no one had touched on the subject that was foremost in all their minds. Later in the meal, the conversational mood passed as fewer and fewer topics remained that avoided reference to the murders. St. Cyr had found it unprofitable to attempt to steer the talk into a rewarding channel, had accepted that such things must wait until after the meal, but was by now considerably tense. Wearing the bio-computer, he seemed to have less patience with the rituals of daily existence and the rigid rules of protocol and manners than when he was not in his symbiotic role.

He accepted an amber liqueur from Jubal Alderban, who was doing the honor of personally pouring for the family.

"At times," Jubal said, "one longs for a respite from all this mechanical, loving care."

St. Cyr tasted the drink. It smelled like burnt plums and tasted like minted cherries.

He sat down in one of the many form-fitting black chairs spaced in a cozy ring by the fireplace, felt it shift and writhe under him as it explored his structural peculiarities and adjusted to an optimum mold. The others, except for Jubal, who was still serving, were already seated, watching him with only thinly disguised anxiety.

In a moment, when they all had drinks and were comfortably fitted by their chairs, St. Cyr broached the subject. "Business," he said.

Alicia, Jubal's wife, sighed. She was a pretty woman, petite and dark,

possessed of that noticeable glow of health that indicated the use of rejuvenation drugs of some sort. "I suppose you'll want the whole thing, step by step." Her tone was practiced weariness on the surface, something much more personal and sad beneath.

"Step by step," St. Cyr affirmed.

Alicia paled, blinked at him stupidly for a moment, licked her lips and attempted to regain her composure. She had clearly expected him to say that, but she had been hoping against the necessity of a retelling.

"I'm sorry," St. Cyr told her. "But all that I've heard thus far is what Mr. Alderban posted in the light-telegram, and what Teddy told me."

"You questioned Teddy?" Dane asked incredulously. He was a tall, lean boy with a dark complexion, black eyes, and thin, pale lips. When he spoke he kept his head tilted downwards, looking up over the shelf of his brow at the detective.

"Of course I questioned him. He's unemotional, scientifically logical, a good source for first impressions."

"No, a bad source," Dane said, sure of himself. He laced his long, bony fingers around the tiny glass of liqueur. "This is an emotional subject, after all, not a dry one. The *du-aga-klava* is *real*."

"You think so?" St. Cyr asked.

He wished that Dane would raise his head. As long as he sat in that position, on the edge of the couch, his shoulders hunched forward, it was difficult to tell anything of what he was thinking by examining his face and eyes.

"It's real enough," Dane said.

"Bullshit," Tina Alderban said, ignoring the angry look her brother directed at her.

St. Cyr turned toward the girl, waiting for something more. She sat in an overstuffed fur chair, made more petite by the size of it. She was dark like Dane, though more olive than brown, and her face was more open, her eyes more wide-set than his, her lips sensuous and heavy, whereas Dane's lips were thin and serious. Her black hair dropped straight over her shoulders, curled around the tips of her small breasts, as if accentuating them. At eighteen, she was one of the most interesting women that St. Cyr had ever seen. He wondered if he would have an opportunity to seduce her before the case was finished...

Negative, the bio-computer informed him.

Still and all, she was a charming creature, with—

Negative. Too many familial complications would result from such a rash act, obstructing your conduct of the case.

"I'll tell him the whole thing," Jubal said, sliding forward on his chair. The seat and arms of the chair rippled, gauged his new position, firmed up around his buttocks and thighs.

"No, Jubal," Hirschel interposed.

He had only spoken once before that evening, and then only to offer St. Cyr an obligatory welcome. He was quite like Jubal, heavy in the chest and shoulders, over six feet tall, leonine with a mane of hair and muttonchop sideburns. The chief difference was in the lines of his face. Where Jubal was soft, his cheeks smooth and the angles of his face pleasantly rounded, Hirschel was hard, cut deep by character lines, his skin tanned and leathery. Also, while Jubal was white-haired yet somehow young, Hirschel was black-haired and old, infinitely old despite his young man's constitution. Perhaps, actually, Hirschel was only a couple of years Jubal's senior, and certainly no more than a decade older; in experience, however, in knowledge and cunning, he was Jubal's great-great grandfather.

The simple statement of the negative had drawn everyone's attention to the older man. He said, "I'll tell it, because I don't have nearly the degree of emotional involvement that you do, Jubal."

Jubal nodded. "Go ahead."

Hirschel turned to St. Cyr, smiled slightly, looking quite unlike the rider in the storm, the man with the pig heads slapping bloodily at his hip. Succinctly, he related much the same story that St. Cyr had gotten from Teddy, though with no extrapolation whatsoever.

"You were living here at the times of both murders?"

"Yes," Hirschel said. "I arrived a month before Leon's death; needless to say, a good part of this visit has not been a happy time for me." However, if he actually did agonize over the deaths of his niece and nephew, he did not indicate his inner turmoil in any way beyond this brief statement. He appeared healthy and happy, without the dark lines of anxiety around the eyes and mouth that characterized both Jubal and Alicia Alderban.

Correctly projecting the line of thought St. Cyr was then pursuing, Hirschel said, "And, also needless to say, that puts me on your list of suspects."

"How absurd!" Jubal said.

"Really, Hirschel," Alicia said, "I doubt that Mr. St. Cyr—"

"But he does suspect me," Hirschel said. "And he should. Just as he suspects all the rest of you."

Jubal seemed twice as outraged at this. He turned to St. Cyr, his thick white brows drawn together over his eyes in one snowy bar. "Is this true? Do you think we'd murder our own children—brothers and sisters?"

"Hirschel is correct," St. Cyr affirmed. "I suspect everyone until I have the data to logically eliminate suspects."

"I won't have it that way," Jubal said, putting down his cordial.

"Of course you will," Hirschel said quickly, before St. Cyr could speak. "You wanted a cyberdetective because you wanted a complete investigation, a thorough investigation. Now, you're going to have to take the sour with the sweet."

"Hirschel, after all—" Jubal began.

Then something he saw in the older man's expression cut him short. His

voice died in volume and conviction until he only sighed, shrugged his shoulders and picked up the tiny glass of liqueur again.

St. Cyr wondered what had passed between the two men. Clearly, Hirschel exercised some power over Jubal, though he was not a tenth as wealthy as the younger man and hardly old enough to pull a routine about being older-and-wiser-than-thou. Was it only his personality, so much more dominant than Jubal's, that had quieted the family head, or was there something else here? File it for consideration.

Turning from the hunter, St. Cyr addressed the entire family. "Whose room is nearest the one Leon had?"

"Mine," Betty said.

She was demure, not quite as stunningly attractive as her sister but lovely in her own right. Her hair was yellow, her eyes blue, her features Roman in the traditional "classic" beauty that made good marble statues. When she spoke, her voice was so soft that St. Cyr found himself leaning forward in his chair to hear what she said.

"You sleep in the room next to the one in which Leon was killed?"

"That's right."

"You were in your room that night?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear anything?"

"No." She looked down at her hands, tried to hide them in each other, fingers kicking like spider legs. "We have such excellent soundproofing here."

Half an hour later, St. Cyr had asked fifty questions and listened to fifty variations of Betty's excuse: "The walls are thick here"; "Sound doesn't travel well from one level of the house to another"; "After all, Mr. St. Cyr, the gardens are *huge*, and even if I happened to be out for a stroll at the same time poor Dorothea was murdered, I could hardly be expected to see or hear..." The bio-computer stored the answers, replayed them to itself, juxtaposed them, searched for a slip-up in someone's story, an odd clash of details. It found nothing out of the ordinary. St. Cyr, absorbing the family's rich emotional impressions, achieved no more than his mechanical comrade. The fifty questions might just as well never have been asked, the answers never given.

"I believe," the cyberdetective said, "that will be all for the night. In the morning I'll want to see the dead boy's room, the place in the garden where Dorothea died, other things." He turned to Hirschel as the others stood to go, and he said, "If I might have a word or two with you, I would appreciate it."

"Certainly," Hirschel said, sitting down again.

Jubal sat down too.

St. Cyr looked at the white-haired patriarch, then at Hirschel. "I wanted to speak with you alone."

"Come along to my quarters," Hirschel said, rising, unfolding like a paper toy until he towered a few inches above St. Cyr.

They had reached the door to the drawing room when Jubal spoke to their backs. "You're wrong."

St. Cyr turned. "Perhaps."

"You should be looking outside the family."

"I will."

"You're wasting time."

"Perhaps."

Jubal looked at Hirschel, saw that same undefined power that had quieted him before, was quieted again by it.

"See you in the morning," Hirschel said.

"In the morning," Jubal echoed.

They opened the door, left the room, closed the door behind them.

"You must forgive him," Hirschel said.

"For what?"

"His behavior, of course. It's just that he's so on edge."

"I understand that; it's natural; there's nothing to forgive."

Hirschel nodded, turned. Over his shoulder, as he walked for the nearest elevator, he said, "Come along."

Hirschel's rooms were no larger or smaller than St. Cyr's and were also on the fifth level of the mansion. The color scheme here was browns and greens instead of various shades of blue, providing an effect not unlike an open forest, heavy boughs, grasses, growth. The hunter dearly belonged here.

The walls were decorated with the mounted heads of half a dozen animals: deer, large cats, and a wolf that must have been a hundred pounds heavier than Hirschel himself. Each of the creatures stared over the heads of the two men, its gaze fixated on something beyond the walls of the room.

"Will the boar heads go here?" St. Cyr asked.

Hirschel looked surprised.

"I was on my balcony, watching the storm, when you rode in this afternoon."

Hirschel smiled, looked at his trophies. "Yes, the pigs will give the collection balance; nothing can look more fierce than a wild boar with its teeth bared."

"Could it have been a wild boar that killed Dorothea in the garden?"

"Hardly. You're forgetting the wolf's hair they found. Besides, was it a wild boar that came quietly into the house, sought out Leon and slaughtered him without a sound?"

"No," St. Cyr said. "But was it a wolf either?"

Hirschel shrugged.

"You don't believe this *du-aga-klava* story, do you, as Dane does?"

"I think it sounds like nonsense. However, I've lived long enough to know

never to completely discount any possibility."

He sounded, St. Cyr thought, like Teddy, as if he were purposefully trying to plant certain doubts in the cyberdetective's mind.

He is only properly qualifying his responses.

"As I understand it, everyone in the family has some artistic talent or other."

Hirschel said, "Yes, even Teddy."

"Teddy?"

Hirschel slumped into an antique chair that made no attempt to form itself around him, motioned St. Cyr to the chair across from his. "Jubal's main interest is sculpture, but he designs cutlery, dishes, goblets, what-have-you, as a diversion. In order to spare himself all the manual labor involved in molding and machining the finished product, he programs his designs into Teddy. The Reiss Corporation, as an option, has especially designed and programmed Teddy to perform well in all phases of silver-working. He has his own workshop on the first level, near the garage."

"And you?" St. Cyr asked.

"No talents," Hirschel said, smiling. The cyberdetective noticed that the large, rugged man curiously resembled the head of the wolf behind him when he smiled.

Immaterial.

"Why is that?"

"I'm not a resident in the house, merely a biannual guest. I never came under Jubal's influence when he was on this hypno-keying kick many years ago."

"You sound as if you thought that hypno-keying was a bad idea."

"Depends on what you want out of life," Hirschel said.

"What do you want?"

"The same thing that I traipse from world to world in search of every year of my life—adventure, danger, excitement."

"And the artist has none of that?"

"Only secondhand."

"If you have so little in common with the family, why do you return every other year to visit?"

"They're my only relatives," Hirschel said. "A man needs a family now and again."

St. Cyr nodded. "How old are you?"

"Sixty."

"Six years older than Jubal." When Hirschel nodded, the cyberdetective asked, "Are you wealthy?"

The big man evidenced no dissatisfaction with St. Cyr's prying. "Quite wealthy," he said. "Though I'm not as wealthy as Jubal, by even a fraction." He smiled the wolfs smile again and said, "That still makes me suspect,

doesn't it? Perhaps even more than before."

"Are you mentioned in Jubal's will?"

"Yes," Hirschel said, still smiling. "I receive the least of all those included—unless, of course, I'm the only survivor."

St. Cyr looked at the wolf. For a moment he felt that its glass eyes had shifted their dead gaze, stared directly at him. He blinked, and the eyes were where they should be, fixed on the air, cold, dry.

"I guess that will be all for tonight," he said, standing.

Hirschel did not rise to see him to the door, but the panel slid open as he took a few steps toward it.

At the door St. Cyr turned and looked at the wolf, looked at Hirschel, said, "The wolfs head there..."

"What of it?"

"It's one of those now extinct?"

"Yes."

"And is that how the *du-aga-klava* is supposed to appear in its animal shape?"

Hirschel turned in his chair and examined the long-snouted, wickedly-toothed beast. "Pretty much that way, I suppose, though a deal larger and far more ugly."

St. Cyr cleared his throat and said, "Why did Climicon label the wolf for extinction?"

"It was a predator, a very dangerous animal," Hirschel said "It was not at all the sort of thing you'd want running loose in the woods on a rich man's paradise."

"Then why let the boars live?"

Hirschel clearly had not considered that conflict before. He looked surprised, turned to examine the wolf again, frowned. "You've got a good point there, for a boar can be twice as deadly and mean-tempered as any wolf."

"No ideas?"

Hirschel shook his head; his black hair bounced, fell back into place. "You'll have to ask Climicon about that, but they surely had their reasons."

"I'll find out in the morning," St. Cyr said.

"Let me know what you learn."

"I will. Good night."

St. Cyr stepped out of the room, oriented himself by the paintings on the walls and walked the length of the long corridor to his own suite.

In his bedroom, stretched out full length on the enormous waterbed, he said, "I've still got nothing concrete to go on, no base to build the case from."

A few things.

"Nothing."

Bits and pieces.

"Like Hirschel's curious resemblance to the wolf when he smiles?"
Immaterial.

FOUR: *An Ugly Incident*

"Visitor, Mr. St. Cyr," the house computer said.

The cyberdetective sat up, swung to the edge of the shifting bed and stood. "Who is it?"

"Mr. Dane Alderban," the house told him.

"Just a minute."

"Holding, sir."

St. Cyr took off his suit jacket and draped it over a chair, put the largest of his unopened suitcases on the bed, opened it, quickly dumped out the contents, ran his fingers along the cloth lining and watched it curl back from the concealed pocket in the bottom. He removed a handgun and a chamois shoulder holster, amused as he always was that this one requirement of his profession had changed little in a thousand years. He buckled the holster on, put the gun in the smooth sleeve of it, slipped into his coat again.

"Still holding, sir."

"On my way right now," St. Cyr said, wondering what Dane Alderban had to say on the sly, away from the rest of the family. He stepped out of the bedroom, pulled the door shut, crossed the sitting room as he called for Dane's admittance.

The door slid up, and the young man entered the room fast, stopped beyond St. Cyr, and looked quickly around as if he expected to find someone else there.

"You'll have to excuse the delay," St. Cyr said. "I was dressing for bed when you called."

Dane raised a long-fingered hand and impatiently waved away the suggestion of an apology. He sat down in the largest easy chair in the room, by the patio doors, barely able to contain the nervous energy that normally kept him on his feet, pacing, moving. He said, "I've come here to make a suggestion that could put an early end to this whole affair—if you'll have the good grace to listen to me and to think about what I have to say."

St. Cyr went to the bar, folded it open, looked at the contents and said, "A drink?"

"No, thank you."

St. Cyr poured Scotch, put the bottle back, popped two cubes into the glass and to hell with bruising the liquor, sat down in the chair that faced Dane's from the other end of the closed patio doors, putting a long swath of darkness on one side of them. "My job is to listen to people, consider what they tell me—and put a swift end to the case."

Dane sat on the edge of the chair, his elbows on his knees, his head bent down, looking up at St. Cyr over the ridge of his brow, just as he had done in the drawing room earlier. It almost seemed that he affected the position to

conceal most of the expression on his face.

He said, "St. Cyr, I am thoroughly convinced that the native legends are the only answer to the murders."

"The *du-aga-klava*, a werewolf among us?"

"Yes."

St. Cyr did not reply.

"That thing you wear, the other half of you..."

"The bio-computer?"

"Yes. It rejects the notion of werewolves, doesn't it, discards the consideration right off?"

St. Cyr took a sip of Scotch, found it smooth and hot, a good brand. "It doesn't, strictly speaking, discard any probability. It assigns degrees of possibility to every theory that comes up, that's all."

"To werewolves—a very low degree of possibility."

"Most likely."

Dane drew even more to the edge of his chair, increased the odd angle from which he carried on the conversation. "So low a degree, in fact, that it doesn't give serious consideration to the idea at all."

"It doesn't reason in absolutes," St. Cyr corrected, "neither negative nor positive absolutes."

Suddenly the young man sighed and slid back in the easy chair, as if someone had tapped his skull and released the energy in one puff. He said, "At least, give me a chance to show you a few things. Come with me tomorrow when I go up into the mountains."

"What will we find there?" St. Cyr asked.

"Gypsies," Dane said.

"Native Darmanians?"

"Yes. But there is one old woman, especially, who may be able to convince even your bio-computer. Her name is Norya, and she knows all there is to know about these mountains."

"To convince both halves of me, of the symbiote, she'll have to have facts, not tales, evidence and not superstition."

"She has all of that, facts *and* tales, evidence *and* superstition." He slid forward on the chair again, his charge of energy having apparently built up to full strength. "Will you come along with me?"

St. Cyr was about to reply when the bio-computer insinuated a command, unvoiced, into the conversation: *Go easy on the liquor; you need to think clearly; you may have to react suddenly*. He looked at the glass in his hand and saw that he had finished all but half an ounce of Scotch in the last couple of minutes, though he had not realized that he was even sipping at it.

"Will you?" Dane asked again.

"What time?"

"After lunch; meet me in the garage on the first level."

"Fine," St. Cyr said.

"You won't regret giving me your time."

Dane got to his feet as if something had sneaked up behind him and gouged him in the ribs; he laced his fingers and stretched his arms, cracking his large knuckles.

St. Cyr stood too, trying to think if there were something he should ask the boy, some new angle of questioning warranted by the circumstances, and his train of thought was derailed by a curious, abrupt bark that seemed to come from the direction of the patio. They both turned and looked, but saw nothing out of place.

Then the noise came again, longer this time, long enough to identify. It was a woman's scream.

"Betty!" Dane said.

"Where's her room?"

"Fourth level."

"Let's go."

The door opened at their approach, though not fast enough, forcing them to crouch and scuttle under it. They burst into the hallway and ran to the nearest elevator, found that it was in use, turned to a lift farther along the corridor and leaped inside of that. Dane punched a button on the control panel. The doors clapped shut, and the elevator dropped forty feet in one sickening lurch, grooved into horizontal rails and carried them sideways for a moment before opening its doors again on the main corridor of the fourth level. They stepped into the hall, listened, heard nothing.

That struck St. Cyr as being the worst thing they could have heard—anything but silence.

"This way," Dane said.

He led St. Cyr to a side corridor where they came upon Hirschel, who was pounding at a concealed door and calling Betty's name.

"What happened?" the cyberdetective asked.

The hunter shook his head. "I was going into my room upstairs when I heard her scream; knew immediately who it was. I just got here a moment ago."

"Is there any way to open the door?" St. Cyr asked.

Dane said, "We have private voice-coded locks. But Teddy can get in if he has to."

"Call him, then."

"No need, sir," Teddy said close behind them. He had drifted down the corridor without making a sound. "If you'll stand back, I'll get you in." When they followed his instructions, he slid to a point just under the recessed slot that marked the entrance, and he emitted a high, keening tone that was almost beyond the range of human hearing. The door slid open at this unsyllabled command.

At the far end of the corridor Jubal Alderban appeared, dressed in pajamas

and a robe, his head bent forward and his shoulders hunched nearly to his ears, not running and yet not taking his time, either. He seemed afraid to react—as if, running, he would generate the reason he had to run, and if walking, he would somehow anger the Fates by taking their portents too casually. Alicia followed him, plainly tired, resigned.

"Keep them out of her room," St. Cyr told Hirschel.

He and Dane went into the suite, where only a table lamp burned near a writing desk, leaving most of the room in deep shadow.

"Betty?" Dane called.

She did not reply.

"The patio," St. Cyr told him, indicating the open glass doors.

Dane started forward.

"Wait!" St. Cyr dipped into his chamois holster and drew his pistol. "You stay well behind me."

"My *sister* has just—"

"Stay behind me," St. Cyr said, his voice loud but brittle, no tone to debate. "I'm not one of the family, not marked like the rest of you seem to be."

Reluctantly, Dane obeyed, falling into step behind the detective as St. Cyr crossed the room and stepped through the double glass doors. As he placed one foot on the patio, the detective turned and shoved him backwards into Betty's room, almost knocking him down.

"What's the idea—"

"She's dead," St. Cyr told him. He blocked the patio entrance.

"Betty?"

"Yes."

Dane tried to say something, moved his lips without making a sound.

"No need for you to see her."

Slowly the boy's face dissolved, working its way from fear into horror, slowly through the horror into an emotion that would last, into grief. In a few minutes, it would not be a face any longer, just a pale wet mass of doughy flesh.

St. Cyr told him to get the police and to make it quick.

Dane turned slowly and, numbed, not nearly so agile as he had been only a short while ago, started for the door.

St. Cyr added: "And tell everyone to stay together, right in the corridor outside. No one is to wander off by himself. If Tina hasn't heard the commotion by now, two of you go and fetch her back here."

Dane nodded and went through the open doorway, weaving from side to side; he bawled something unintelligible to the others.

St. Cyr turned away from him and walked onto the patio again, careful not to touch anything or to step in the blood. He looked at the corpse and fought down the nausea it caused. Several very sharp tines—claws?—had caught her at the base of her slim neck, just above the collarbone, gouged deep and then

ripped straight up with awful force, nearly tearing her head loose.

Everywhere: blood. Blood looked black in the darkness.

At the patio railing, not daring to lean against the bars for fear of smearing some trace of the killer, St. Cyr looked down on the well-kept lawn, at the lumps of shrubbery, the well-groomed trees and the hedge-bordered flagstone walkways. It was all so manicured, so still and perfect in outline, that it might have been made of wax, a stage setting. He looked beyond the boundaries of the estate, at the rangier valley floor where all manner of scrub grew, beyond that at the foothills and the mountains in the distance, the peaks from which that afternoon's dark thunderhead clouds had come. So far as he could see in the dim light of the two tiny moons, nothing moved in that adumbrative landscape.

He knelt beside the corpse and peered into the wide, glassy eyes that stared at the patio ceiling. Her fixed stare reminded him of the trophies on Hirschel's wall, and from there it was an easy second step to visualize Betty's head ranked among the others, posed between the snarling, wild-eyed boar heads...

Suddenly, thanks to the bio-computer, St. Cyr recalled that the suite had been in darkness when he and Dane had first entered—still was, for that matter. Taking his gun out of the holster again, he stepped off the patio into the sitting room again, called up the overhead lights, which reacted to vocal stimuli. In two minutes he had been in every closet in all three rooms and bath, and he had not encountered anyone.

He put his gun away once more.

He had known it would not be that easy.

Dane appeared in the doorway, still holding himself together, much to St. Cyr's surprise. "I called the police."

"How long until they'll be here?"

"Always been fast—other times. No more than twenty minutes by helicopter."

"Tina?"

"She's in the corridor, with everyone else."

"Keep her company."

Dane went away, and no one else tried to enter. Alicia Alderban was sobbing loudly, and Jubal seemed to be trying to console her. Both of them sounded distant, faint. If Betty had been killed indoors, rather than on the open patio, the noise would never have carried far enough to alert anyone. The sound-proofing truly was excellent.

St. Cyr pulled a chair up next to the open glass doors and sat down to wait for the authorities. He did not join the family because he wanted time to think, to sort out these recent developments and decide what they meant

One thing: Dane must be innocent, for he was with St. Cyr when Betty was killed. Forget him as a suspect, then.

Do not completely forget him, the bio-computer qualified.

And why not? He could not possibly have torn the girl's throat out; he

could not have been two places at once.

He could be an accomplice. If two persons are involved, it could have been Dane's responsibility to see that you were occupied during the murder—and to be certain that you quickly identified the screamer. Without him, you would not have reached her room as quickly, for you do not know the way without a map. He may have been assigned to lead you to the scene.

To what purpose?

The bio-computer shell, still tapped into his spine, its gossamer fingers still splayed throughout his flesh, offered no further postulation.

St. Cyr thought, forming the segments of the thought rigidly as if trying to convince himself more than anyone else: Dane would not have any reason to lead me to Betty's room if he were mixed up in the murders.

Perhaps. Perhaps not. This is merely a point that should be given careful consideration.

The more he thought about it, the more St. Cyr found that he had to agree. It was something to consider, all right. From the beginning he had doubted the sincerity of Dane's belief in werewolves, for he knew that the Alderban boy—like the entire family—was well-educated. Too well-educated to hold such silly superstitions easily. It had occurred to him that Dane was feigning these beliefs, acting out some role that, somehow, would protect him against accusation. Perhaps he felt that, playing the superstitious fool, his true reaction to anything that happened or anything that was asked him would be misinterpreted, and that his genuine intentions would therefore be obscured. This notion, atop the possibilities the bio-computer had just suggested, made it impossible for him to remove Dane from the list of suspects.

In the distance, the night was broken by the clatter of helicopter rotors turning at high speed.

St. Cyr rose and stepped onto the patio. Far down the valley but drawing swiftly closer, large yellow headlights burned three hundred feet above the valley floor.

St. Cyr turned and looked at the dead girl one last time.

She had not moved, even though he would not have been surprised to find her position changed.

Nonsense.

He bent and pulled her lids closed, one at a time, holding them down until they remained in place. It was a small gesture. He had not known the girl well enough to feel sorry for her, but since she had lost her classic beauty to the wicked tines that had torn her open, he felt that the least she deserved was a bit of dignity when the strangers started pouring in.

FIVE: A Policeman and a Girl

The federal police, with the aid of their limited-response robotic helpmates, spent more than four hours going over the suite, the corpse, the balcony, and the lawn immediately below the balcony. St. Cyr was convinced, after watching them sift and analyze even the dust in Betty's room, that they were not going to turn up anything worthwhile. In the first five minutes of the investigation they had discovered four animal hairs alien to the human body—three of them in the bloody wound and one under Betty's right thumbnail. Ten minutes more, and a mobile robotic lab had definitely matched them with the wolf hairs found on the previous corpse. After that discovery, they were all wasting time. It was almost as if every possible clue had been removed by the killer—who had then planted the four hairs especially for them to find. This one thing. No more.

The Inspector Chief assigned to the case was named Otto Rainy, a plump little man whose quick, pink hands were forever pressing his hair back from his face. He looked as if he had not gotten a haircut in six months, though more because he neglected his appearance than for any reason of style. His clothes were rumpled, his shoes unpolished, the cuffs of his coat frayed badly. He was, despite his appearance, a thorough investigator, careful with his questions, probing. St. Cyr doubted that he missed much.

"Cyberdetective," he said, first thing, when he approached St. Cyr.

"That's right."

"Does it really help?"

"I think so."

"Government isn't so sure about them, though," Rainy said. "No one has issued a ban on them, of course. But if the fedgov really trusted them, the word would have come down long ago for every copper on every world to hook up soonest."

"The government usually is a couple of decades behind science—behind social change, too, for that matter."

"I suppose."

"What have you found?"

Rainy wiped at his hair, pinched the bridge of his nose, wiped at his hair again. His blue eyes were bloodshot and weary. "Nothing more than those four damn hairs."

They were standing at the end of the side corridor that lead to Betty Alderban's room. The others, huddled outside the half-open door to the death scene, had ceased to talk among themselves. No one was crying any longer, either.

St. Cyr said, "Theories?"

"Only that it must have gotten to her on the balcony."

"From the lawn?"

"Yes."

"How far is that from the lawn—thirty feet?"

"Thirty-five."

"Climb it?"

"No handholds," Rainy said. He brushed angrily at his hair now, as if he could feel it crawling purposefully toward his eyes, as if it were a separate, sentient creature. "And no hook or rope marks on the balcony rail."

"Suppose the killer didn't come over the balcony rail, though. Just suppose that he walked right in through her door."

"We've already investigated the possibility," Rainy said, hair-wiping. "Each member of the family has a vocally-coded lock to insure his privacy and, as Jubal said after one of the earlier murders, 'to increase his sense of creative solitude.' "

"Teddy can open those doors," St. Cyr pointed out.

"Oh?"

"You didn't know?"

"No."

"He uses a high-pitched sonic override to operate the mechanism."

"You think his tone could be duplicated?"

"All that anyone would need to do," St. Cyr observed, "is hang around with a tape recorder and wait for Teddy to serve someone breakfast in bed, record the tone for later use."

Rainy thrust both hands in his pockets with such measured violence that it was only good fortune that kept him from ripping his fists through the lining. He seemed to be making a conscious effort not to smooth down his hair. "You talk as if our man must be a member of the family."

"That seems most likely."

"Yes, it does. But what in the world would any of them have to gain by it?"

"Hirschel, for instance, has the entire fortune to gain—if he comes out of this as the sole survivor."

Rainy shook his head and said, "No. He is not so naive as to think that he can kill all of them without arousing suspicion, then walk away with the cash. He appears to me to be a very clever, able man, not a bungler."

"I'd guess not. Still, it's something to keep in mind."

Rainy looked toward the Alderban family, removed one hand from his pocket and wiped his hair, caught himself halfway through the nervous habit, shrugged and finished wiping. He called to Teddy, where the master unit waited with the mourners.

"Yes, sir?" Teddy asked, gliding swiftly forward on gravplates, his long rod arms hanging straight at his sides.

Rainy said, as if blocking it all out for his own benefit, "Each bedroom door—except for the guest bedrooms—is responsive to the voice of its

occupant. Also, you can open all of these doors with a sonic override. Otherwise, is there any way that someone might gain entrance quickly and without making much noise?"

"Yes," Teddy said, surprising both of them. "There is an emergency master key for manual cycling of the doors, in the event of power failure."

"Who keeps the emergency key?" Rainy asked.

"I do," Teddy said.

St. Cyr: "On your person?" It sounded like a strange object for the preposition in this case, but the only one that came to mind.

Teddy said, "No, sir. I keep it in the basement workshop, in my tool cabinet, racked with other keys that I sometimes require."

"The cabinet—is it locked?" Rainy asked.

"Yes, sir."

"And where is *that* key?" St. Cyr asked.

Teddy slid open a small storage slot high on his right side, a tiny niche that had been invisible only a moment earlier. Twisting his shiny, double-elbowed, ball-jointed arm into a fantastic, tortured shape, he extracted the key from this slot and held it up for their inspection.

Rainy sighed rather loudly and put both hands in his pockets again. "Could anyone have made a duplicate?"

Teddy said, "Not without my knowledge. It is always kept in the recess that you have just seen."

"You've never lost it, misplaced it?"

Teddy looked the same, for his metal features were immutable, but he sounded hurt. "Never."

"And it has been with you since the house was built?"

"No, sir," Teddy said. "I have only been with the Alderban family for eight months."

"But it was with the master unit who was here before you?"

"No, sir. The Alderban family had a large number of limited-response mechanicals prior to the acquisition of a master unit. I am their first master unit."

"Well," St. Cyr said, "that means that everyone in the household could have copied the key previously, when it was in the hands of one of the limited response domos. The lesser mechanicals would have given it to any human on demand and taken it back again, once a copy had been made, without retaining a memory-bit on the incident."

Teddy said nothing.

Rainy said, "We'll progress, for the time being anyway, on the notion that no one had a copy made at that time. If someone had been intent on killing some or all of the Alderban family eight months ago, he would not have waited this long to begin, do you think?"

"Not unless he happens to be a psychotic," St. Cyr said. "If he is

completely irrational, there isn't any way of saying, for certain, just what he could be expected to do."

"True. But a psychotic ought to reveal himself, in everyday life, in some bit of eccentricity. For now, let's say the killer has concrete reasons, sound—in his mind—motivations."

St. Cyr nodded agreement, relieved that the federal policeman had not mentioned the *du-aga-klava*.

Rainy said, "Teddy, can we have a look at this cabinet where you keep the emergency key to the bedroom doors?"

"Yes, sir. If you will follow me, please."

He floated into the main corridor and toward the elevator, his long arms hanging loosely at his sides again.

The two detectives followed.

In the elevator, going down, no one said anything. The only sound was the faint hiss of the lift's complex mechanism as they shifted from vertical to horizontal travel and then back again—and the rustle, once, of Rainy removing a hand from a coat pocket in order to brush at his thick hair.

The elevator opened onto the garage, where a number of vehicles were parked in waist-high stalls. Teddy led them across the tile floor and through an iris-ing door into the workshop where he crafted silverware.

"The cabinet is over there," the master unit said, pointing.

The white metal storage box measured approximately three feet high by four feet long, perhaps twelve inches deep. It was bolted to the stone wall, and it appeared to be more than averagely secure.

Rainy crossed the room and climbed onto the work table below the cabinet, stood up, brushed his hands off and carefully examined the seams for chipped paint or the traces of a recent touch-up job. Satisfied that no one had forced the cabinet open, he said, "Okay, Teddy. Would you unlock it now, please."

The master unit glided forth, levitated higher on his gravplates and unlocked the storage unit Rainy swung the door open and looked inside. Two dozen keys were pegged there, all made from the same blank but with differently serrated edges.

"Which key?" Rainy asked.

Teddy pointed to the right top corner peg.

Rainy did not touch it. He said, "I'll send a man down to take prints from it later. But I don't really think we're going to have much luck with it."

St. Cyr asked, "How does the emergency key cycle the door open in the absence of electrical power?"

Teddy swiveled toward the cyberdetective and said, "It disconnects the automatic locking mechanism and reveals a wheel fronting a hydraulic jack that pumps up the door. One has only to turn the wheel half a dozen times to raise the door."

"Perhaps that would be long enough to be discovered, enough time for the

intended victim to sound an alarm," St. Cyr observed.

"No, sir," Teddy said. "The hydraulic jack is essentially silent. And the intended—the intended victim might not be facing the door—or, for that matter, might not even be in the sitting room at all."

Rainy climbed down from the work bench, dusted himself off and looked around the shop at the kilns, lathes, vices, drills, and benches with permanently fixed engraving tools. He looked at Teddy and said, "What's all this for?"

Teddy explained the silver crafts that he and Jubal "collaborated" on, and he offered an example, a goblet that was only half-engraved. It was tall and slim and thus far decorated with a naked girl riding a tiger the whole way around the cup so that the tiger ended with his own tail draped through his mouth.

St. Cyr said, "Do you have the tools here to make duplicates of these keys?"

"Of course."

"You make them yourself?"

"Yes. It is highly unlikely that a key could be lost, and—"

St. Cyr interrupted him. "When was the last time you had to machine a duplicate key?"

"I've never needed to," Teddy said. "A master unit is quite efficient. It doesn't lose things."

St. Cyr looked at the federal policeman quizzically and said, "Well?"

"Nothing more for us to do here," Rainy said. "I'll send a man down to take prints from that key, but later. Let's get back upstairs and see if anything else has been turned up."

Nothing else was, of course, turned up.

The key in the workshop cabinet was as bare of fingerprints as every surface in Betty's room had been.

Finally the police machines were moved out of the house and loaded aboard the helicopter again, along with the uniformed technicians who guided most of them. The corpse was removed too, to be taken back to police headquarters where a more thorough autopsy could be performed, after which it would be cremated according to the Alderban family's wishes. The ashes would be returned in an urn, but no religious ceremony would be held; the Alderbans were non-believers.

Inspector Chief Rainy was the last of his crew to leave, and he asked for a moment of St. Cyr's time before he went. The family still lingered in the corridor outside of Betty's room. Rainy and St. Cyr moved a dozen steps away from them, where they could speak privately.

"I'm not going to leave one of my men behind," Rainy said.

St. Cyr only nodded.

"I planted a man here after Dorothea's death, and absolutely nothing

happened for so long that we pulled him off. Apparently his presence gave the killer a bad case of nerves."

"And just as apparently, my presence here doesn't bother him in the least."

"Anyway, you don't deter him."

St. Cyr said, "You want me to report to you?"

"That's it."

"I will, if I find anything interesting. I would have anyway, without the request." He listened to Rainy thank him, then said, "What do you know about Hirschel?"

Rainy didn't look at all surprised by the question. "Rambler, gamesman. He's been just about anywhere that the hunt is good and done just about everything to lay his life on the line."

'Except murder?'

"You think he'd consider it the ultimate thrill? I doubt that he could be *that* jaded," Rainy said.

"You've no reason to suspect him?"

"No more than the others, I guess."

Then Rainy was gone, and St. Cyr realized that the responsibility for the family's safety had devolved, suddenly, to him. He looked at them, realized that everyone but Hirschel would be an easy mark when the time came for the killer to strike again—if, indeed, he intended to commit a fourth murder.

Strong possibility.

"Are there any weapons in the house?" St. Cyr asked Jubal.

"I won't permit my children to have them," he said. He was as aggressive as ever, surprisingly contained in the face of Betty's death. Even Alicia had stopped crying, though her eyes were swollen and red.

"I have a number of weapons, of course," Hirschel said. "It is my hobby."

"No," Jubal said. "I will not allow everyone to go around armed with deadly weapons. As likely as not, inexperienced as we all are in such things, we'd end up accidentally killing each other or ourselves."

"I have narcotic-dart pistols," Hirschel said. "They produce an hour of sound sleep, nothing worse."

"How many do you have?" St. Cyr asked.

"Three different types, all workable in this situation. They all fire clusters of darts, so you don't even have to aim well, just point and pull the trigger." The big, dark man seemed to be enjoying the tension.

"How about that?" St. Cyr asked Jubal.

The patriarch's white hair was in complete disarray. He tried to comb it in place with his fingers, frowned, and said, "I guess that would be all right."

"Get the guns," St. Cyr told Hirschel.

The hunter was back in five minutes and explained the operation of each piece. St. Cyr left one with Jubal and Alicia, warning them to stay close together whenever possible and never to leave each other for even a moment

during the night hours. Two of the three murders had taken place late at night. The second he gave to Dane, who seemed eager to understand its workings and willing to use it.

"I doubt it's going to work, though," he said.

"Why is that?" St. Cyr asked.

"I think the *du-aga-klava* is only susceptible to certain substances. Drugs most likely have no effect on it."

St. Cyr looked at Hirschel to see what his reaction was to what Dane had said; he felt more comradeship with the violent man than with any of the others, even though he also had greater suspicions about him. But the hunter seemed unmoved, either way, by the theory of supernatural intervention.

The third handgun went to Tina, who quickly caught on to the proper way to hold it and take aim. Hirschel said that she would make a fine marksman. Jubal looked unhappy at that.

"I'd like to make a suggestion," Tina said when Hirschel had finished explaining the narcotic-dart pistol to her.

She had been so taciturn before that St. Cyr was surprised by this sudden turnabout. In fact, he thought it was the longest statement he had ever heard her make. "What is that?" he asked.

"That someone run a check on Walter Dannery."

Puzzled, St. Cyr said, "Who is he?"

"A man my father fired from the family business about a year and a half ago."

St. Cyr turned to Jubal. "Is he a possible enemy?"

Jubal waved the suggestion away as if it were a bothersome insect flitting about his face. "The man was a weakling, an embezzler. He would not have the nerve for something like this."

"Just the same," St. Cyr said, "I'd like to hear about him."

"My accountants came to me with proof that he'd embezzled nearly two hundred and eighty thousand credit units over a period of nine months. They had already let him go, but he seemed to blame the whole thing on me. Offered a sob story about dependent children, a sick wife, all very melodramatic. But he's been gone from Darma for quite a long time, well over a year."

"Have you told Inspector Rainy about him?"

"Yes, first thing."

"He checked Dannery out?"

"Yes. He's gone to Ionus, taken an administrative position in one of the heavy industries there. Whoever hired him is a fool, but at least he's no longer my consideration."

St. Cyr turned to Tina and said, "You think that more ought to be done about this man?"

"Yes," she said. "He was terribly bitter about losing his job, blamed it on everyone but himself—and he broke things the one time he came here."

"Broke things?"

"He smashed a vase," Jubal said, trying to minimize it "He was emotionally unstable, a weakling, as I told you. I threw him out of here myself."

"Just the same," St. Cyr said, "I'll get off a light-telegram to my contact on Ionus tomorrow morning, see what he can dig up. The last thing any detective can afford to do is ignore even the smallest lead."

As the group split up to go back to bed, St. Cyr checked the house map and found that Tina lived on the second level, the only member of the family with quarters that far down. He started after her, aware again of the gently rounded curves of her body, of the richness of her black hair; he caught up with her at the end of the corridor and took her elbow in his hand.

She looked up, eyes black, lips pursed. When he had been asking questions, she was just another subject for interrogation; the bio-computer made certain of his impartiality like that. Now, however, she was much more than a suspect.

He said, "May I see you back to your rooms?"

She looked at the gun in her hand but said, "Okay."

In the elevator, when they were alone, he asked, "Why do you have rooms so far away from the rest of the family?"

"The fourth and fifth levels are pretty much broken up into the regular suites for family and guests, a few small art galleries and music rooms. The third level is where father has his den, mother her retreat. The library is also on the third level, as well as the recreation room and the drawing room, the motion picture theater and the pool. The studio level contains the storage rooms, kitchens, dining room—and my studio. I'm a painter, you know. I need plenty of space. The second level was the only place where I could have the studio the way I wanted it. You'll see soon enough what I mean."

The elevator doors opened, and the hall lights came up in quick response.

They were alone, or seemed to be.

"This way," she said.

She led him to her door, talked it open, went into her studio.

He followed.

The chamber was impressive, especially in that the ceiling was a good fifty feet overhead, arched by stained beams that criss-crossed in a neat geometric pattern. The walls were all white, almost dazzlingly white, broken only by a dozen of her own paintings. Two doors led to other rooms in the suite, and a barred window, forty feet long, was set in the far wall, providing quite a splash of sunlight during the day. The room itself measured approximately sixty by sixty feet.

"See?" she asked, turning to face him, smiling tentatively.

"Very nice."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Your work?" he asked, walking to the nearest painting, though he knew it

was hers, recognized the style from the signed paintings in the fifth floor corridor.

"Yes," she said. Her abrupt tone held no pride.

He examined the painting, saw that it was a portrait of her father, Jubal, done entirely in shades of blue and green—and as if seen through a thousand small fragments of glass, some fragments crack-webbed. "I like it very much," he said.

"Then you haven't much taste for art," she said. When he turned and looked at her, he found that she was serious, though there was a grim humor in her voice.

"Oh?"

"You like the colors, the shapes," she said. "But if you could go beyond that, if you knew some of the criteria for judging art, you'd know what a flop it is."

"And these others?"

"Flops too."

He said: "Upstairs, in the corridors—"

"Disasters," she said, chuckling, though there was little mirth in her chuckle.

"Well," he said, "I disagree. You've got a great deal of talent, so far as I can see."

"Bullshit."

He turned and looked at her and was suddenly caught up by the way the overhead lights gleamed in her black eyes and revealed unsuspected depths, by the way the same light shimmered on the long slide of her hair and turned the black to a very dark, dark blue.

Unconsciously, he let his gaze wander down her slim neck to the pert roundness of the breasts. He felt his hands coming up from his sides, driven by an urge to cup her breasts, and he wondered what she made of his movements.

Somehow he remembered the nightmare from which the bio-computer had wakened him that afternoon, and he felt that it had bearing here, though he could not say how...

His gaze traveled downward still, to the pinch of her waist, the gentle flair of hips, to the long, well-shaped legs that were now all revealed by the shorts she wore. She was barefooted. Somehow this last detail intrigued him more than any other.

Re-direct your attention.

He told the other half of the cyberdetective to go to hell.

You cannot risk physical involvement. That may lead to emotional ties, and you are aware of what that would do to your ability to function at optimum efficiency as a cyberdetective.

St. Cyr still felt the urge to reach for her, to draw her gently to him, to see if that olive skin felt as soft and smooth as it looked. At the same time, the

bio-computer had subtly influenced him, even while he recognized its influence, and he raised his eyes to look only at her face.

He said, "If you really think you're a terrible artist, why do you continue to work?"

She laughed bitterly, laughed so hard that it ended in a choking cough. When she could speak again, she said, "I haven't any choice. There's nothing else I can do but paint, draw, sculpt, watercolor, sketch..."

"Surely you have—"

"No," she interrupted. "Remember, I've undergone hypno-keying—at the age of three, at my father's direction. Do you know what that does to you?"

"Not exactly," he said. "Somehow, it makes certain that you reach your full creative potential."

"And locks you into that."

"I don't understand," he said.

"Each of us seems born with certain abilities," Tina said, turning and crossing to the window, leaning with her back against it. Her black hair and dark complexion paled the night. "Dane, for instance, has an hereditary facility with words, as did Betty and Dorothea. Mother has a solid musical ability. Father, like me, excels in the manual arts."

St. Cyr waited.

"Once you've been through psychiatric hypno-keying, once you've had them in your head nudging your creative talents, you're almost—*possessed* by whatever one ability you have. I *have* to paint. My whole world is painting, drawing; I even gain satisfaction from cleaning my brushes at the end of a day."

She walked away from the window and stood before a self-portrait done in shades of orange and yellow.

She said, "When I try to get away from it— Oh, there are times I get so goddamned disgusted with myself, with my clumsy fingers, with my limited vision, that I never want to think about painting again! But when I run away from it for a while, a few days, the anger goes. And I begin to grow nervous... I find myself anxious to be back at it again, anxious to try to do better at it. I know that I cannot do better, that my talent simply stops at a certain point of achievement, that I'm very good but not great. Yet I always go back. I always pick up the brush again. Over and over I make a fool of myself. I never manage to hold out against the urge for more than a week or two. Sometimes three."

"Maybe, with all this drive—"

She talked over him as if she had not heard him begin to speak. "Everyone who has gone through hypno-keying, unless his creative talent is enormous, supreme, lives in a gentle sort of hell ever after that. He cannot do anything but what the hypno-keying has freed him to do—and he knows he can never do it as well as it can be done. And then the drive, as you said." It was the first indication that she had heard him. "The motivation is somehow stimulated by the hypno-keying. In the end, you can do only one thing, you *want* to do only

one thing, but you can never do it as well as you hope to."

"The others feel this way?" he asked.

"They may not vocalize it as readily, but they feel it."

"It doesn't show," St. Cyr said.

"Doesn't it?" She turned away from her portrait and faced him. She was no longer emotional, no longer angry with herself. In a level voice, she said, "Didn't it seem that the family took Betty's death with little emotion?"

"Your mother was in tears."

"A point for my argument," she said. "Mother went through hypno-training later than all the rest of us. Father was treated as a baby, as were all his children. My mother, however, did not undergo treatment until after they were married. Some vestige of normality remains in her."

"I don't see how you tie together the hypno-keying and any lack of emotional response on your family's part."

"It's easy," she said, and smiled. The smile, as before, was not a smile at all. "Each of us is driven by his particular talent, consumed by it despite the limit of his vision. It is not easy, therefore, to establish relationships with other people, to care deeply about them when your energies are concentrated in this one arena."

"You forget that two other murders have taken place here. I would think all of you justified in reacting less forcefully to this one."

"We reacted the same to the first," Tina said. "A bit of grief, a day or two of loss, then plunge back into the work at hand, create, form, build..." She looked at the paintings on the wall to her right, sighed audibly. "What all of these hypno-keying experts seem not to understand is that you can't create classic art when you have no love life. If love of art is supreme, it's all masturbation. If life, people, places don't come first, there isn't anything for the talent to draw on, no stuffing for the sack."

Though he was not, as she had subtly observed, a man of any great sensitivity—give him bright colors, bold lines, pleasing shapes, loud and lively music any day; to hell with the proper, genteel criteria—he saw in her a deep and awful suffering that, even with the aid of her explanations, he could not clearly grasp. He supposed that, as the attainment of perfect understanding in her art would always elude her, an understanding of her pain would elude him. He had a feeling that she did not sleep well at night, any night but especially this night—and that she tore up more paintings than she kept. He said nothing, for he had nothing to say that would make her feel any better—or any differently, for that matter.

In a quieter voice, almost a whisper, she said, "How can I ever make anything lasting, get anything genuine down on paper or canvas, when I haven't any ability to care for people, for anyone?"

"You could care," he said.

"No."

"Look, you've spent most all your life among other hypno-keyed artists. But if you were living among other people, normal people, they would react

strongly to you, form attachments to you and force you to react as strongly as they did. You could care."

"You really think so?"

"Yes."

Be careful.

Go to hell.

"I doubt it," she said.

The confusion of the real and the subvocal conversations forced him to say, "Doubt what?"

She looked at him curiously and said, "I doubt that I could care for anyone."

"You could," he repeated stupidly.

For a long, awkward moment, they stood facing each other. He did not know how she felt, but he seemed suddenly transformed into a blundering, heavy-handed, club-footed wonder. He could hear himself breathing, and he swore he was as loud as an air-conditioning intake fan. He waited for her to say something, for he was unable to initiate anything more on his own. Then, finally aware that she felt she had already said too much and that she wanted to be alone, he said, "Keep the pistol near you at all times."

"I will."

He said goodnight and left her there.

The elevator ride to the fifth level seemed to take forever.

In his room, he poured himself a healthy glassful of Scotch over a single ice cube—one cube so that there was more room in the tumbler for the liquor.

Liquor will dull your perceptions.

Go to hell.

He knew that he was finished for the day, that he could not go anywhere or do anything without a few hours sleep. He sat down in a chair near the patio doors and quickly worked toward the bottom of his golden drink.

In the last six hours the input of data had greatly increased. So many bits and pieces had been stored, now, that he knew the symbiote that was half him would soon begin to connect one datum with another. If the pace kept on like this, he would be able to slowly formulate a few theories in another day, maybe two days, then logically eliminate a number of the present suspects.

Then, perhaps, before too much longer, the case would be finished.

He realized as he swallowed the last of the Scotch that he did not want it to be finished.

That is an unhealthy attitude.

He wanted to apprehend the killer, of course, and before anyone else died. He wanted to pinpoint the man, get him running, corner him and break him down, thoroughly break him down. That was what he was all about, after all; that was what Baker St. Cyr did well. But once the killer was out of the way, he did not want to have to leave this house.

Get right down to it, then: He did not want to have to leave Tina Alderban.

Avoid emotional complications of this nature.

He got up and poured another glass of Scotch.

He sat down in the same chair and took a large swallow of the drink, stirred the ice with his finger.

Tina Alderban...

When he closed his eyes, he could see her on the insides of his lids, standing naked, wearing a cape of black hair, holding out her arms to him, with two shiny globes of light before her, one resting lightly on each of her flat palms...

He remembered the nightmare again: the cracked macadam roadway, the tumble-down buildings... Somehow, Tina Alderban seemed to be a part of it.

It is very late. Even if you sleep until noon, you will not get your proper rest.

To counter the stodgy half of his symbiote, he raised his glass and sipped more Scotch. Apparently, however, the bio-computer had gotten to him on a deep, motivational level, for he put the glass down when it was still half full, undressed and went to bed.

SIX: *Nightmare and Paranoia*

St. Cyr stepped quickly behind a huge slab of concrete pavement which some tremor of the earth had cracked, lifted, and jammed toward the dark sky. He pressed his back against it, making himself as small as he could, shivered as the dampness of the chilled stone seeped through his shirt.

He listened intently, but he could no longer hear the soft footsteps that had dogged him until this moment.

Stepping from behind the slab, he stared down the length of the avenue, saw that he was alone—unless, of course, someone was hiding behind one of the other tilted blocks of paving.

He did not have time to search them. He could only press forward. But when he did, the footsteps were behind him once more, close.

He ran.

As he increased his pace, the sky seemed to lower, the blackness sink until it lay just above his head, like a roof. The buildings on either side began to close in as well, until the street was barely wide enough to run through. He remembered that, when he had begun this journey, the street had appeared to dwindle toward the horizon until the buildings seemed to come together at a point no larger than the prick of a pin. He had thought that this was only a trick of perspective. Now he saw that the closing together was genuine. In a few minutes, in another couple of thousand yards, the buildings would touch, putting an end to the avenue, leaving him nowhere to run to avoid the stalker.

Behind him, the night suddenly sighed and, an instant later, exploded around him.

Turning, he saw the tottering buildings had collapsed in his wake, bricks tossed into the air like milkweed fluff, dust devils whirling gleefully towards him.

He turned and ran.

On both sides, the abandoned structures, broken windows like mouths full of transparent teeth, leered down at him, swayed in sympathy with his rapid footfalls.

Then the street ended.

The buildings fused into a smooth curve of stone, blocking exit. He stopped, felt the curve, seeking a lever or concealed device for opening a path, found none. Because he was no longer running, no dangerous vibrations were set up; silence was soon restored to the street. In the silence, as he stood bewildered before the fused stones, he heard the footsteps behind him again.

He turned.

The stalker was only a few yards away. The stalker was an old, old friend whose touch he could no longer tolerate, and the stalker walked straight for him, arms open to receive him in a cold embrace...

Baker St. Cyr sat straight up in bed, a scream caught in the back of his throat, his hands full of twisted sheets.

It was a nightmare, the bio-computer said.

He pushed up, felt the water mattress give considerably and attempt to suck him back down, crabbed to the edge of the bed and got quickly to his feet, though once standing he was not certain he could remain that way for long. His legs felt weak, as if he had been running for a long, long time without rest, and his head ached from the top of his forehead backwards and down the length of his neck, as if his skull might be loose. For a moment he had an absurd vision: his head falling off his shoulders, bouncing twice on the thick carpet, rolling over and over until it came to rest against the rectangular window, staring out at the dawn that already filtered under the balcony roof.

The dawn. Suddenly it seemed to him that all of his problems were somehow tied to the rising of the sun, and that if he could force Nature to move backwards into darkness, everything would once more be all right. He stumbled to the floor-to-ceiling window, slapped the palm switch next to the panes, and watched them go abruptly opaque, then change in color until they looked as black as onyx and did not permit passage to a single thread of sunlight.

But that was not enough. He still felt weak, terribly weak, and—frightened.

It was only a nightmare.

Shut up.

He went into the bathroom and, without turning on any lights, found the cold water faucet, filled the sink, bent and splashed his face until he was shivering all over. He dried his face. He felt no better.

Standing before the mirror in the dark, he tried to see his face and could not, was glad that he could not.

Your dream contained a number of familiar symbols, including the broken road, which is, to you, THE PAST.

I don't want my dreams analyzed, St. Cyr told it.

The buildings equal old memories.

Stop it, damn you!

He went into the bedroom again, realized that he could not lie down and sleep, strode into the sitting room, where the patio doors let a wash of warm light into the room. He palmed the switch there and was rewarded with more darkness. After that, he stood in the center of the room, naked but for the shell clamped to his chest, wondering what he should do next.

Do you know whose footsteps you were hearing in the dream?

I don't want to hear about the fucking dream!

You are not well.

The old stand-by rejoinder: go to hell.

You actually should not be a practicing cyberdetective until you have had thorough psychological counseling. You have been hiding too many things

from yourself, and you are no longer able to hold them all in. Thus the dream and the stalker in the dream. You have forgotten whom the stalker represents, who that was in real life, or have pretended to forget. I feel strongly that...

The bio-computer sensed the attack even as it began, and it did not complete the admonition.

St. Cyr screamed, though his throat was so constricted that no voice could come out, only a thin hiss like a prophesying snake.

He felt as if he had been invaded, violated.

There was something inside of him, something crawling so deep inside of him that if he did not cast it out immediately, it would draw even deeper and become inaccessible.

You are suffering from a form of paranoia common to all cyberdetectives...

He took a step.

He could feel the creature stirring within him.

He was certain it was creeping inexorably along his spine, anxious for a permanent seat in the center of his brain.

... who occasionally feel that the symbiote is not a symbiote at all, but that you are harboring a parasite.

The only thing he wanted was to cut it out of him, dig down into himself, find this creature and cast it away. He did not think he could manage this with a knife alone, but he decided that was his only hope.

Remove the shell. Rest. Relax. Remove the shell.

He had his fingers around the shell and was prying at it.

I am no parasite. Be calm. I only use the personal, first person pronouns because my thought pulses are transformed into words in your own brain, and you are the one who chooses the first person.

His whole chest ached.

He saw light behind his eyes, growing.

Be calm. I am not even a personality, only a source of data, a system of correlation, a machine for making linkages. Remove the shell. Throw the switch, remove the shell, rest.

While the light grew behind his eyes, he found the switch, turned it off.

He pulled the shell away from his chest.

He ripped loose the two male plugs.

Behind his eyes the light burst white, yellowed, turned orange, then settled into dark browns, in which he slept like a caterpillar nestled in a cocoon.

The sleep was fitful, but at least he did not dream. And though the paranoid siege had drained him, it had also served to make him forget all about the nightmare, the broken road, and the stalker...

He woke at eleven, took a long bath, dried himself, decided against breakfast, drank a glass of Scotch on an empty stomach. The liquor hit hard,

but warmed him. At noon, he realized he could no longer postpone the inevitable, and he hooked up to the bio-computer once again.

It had nothing to say.

At the telephone, he found the number for the nearest Worldwide Communications office and sent off a light-telegram to his contact on Ionus, an industrial detective named Talmud. That done, he placed his second call to the Climicon data banks. When the taped voice requested his purpose, he spoke slowly and clearly, to properly key the machines: "Data requested. Why did Climicon issue directives for the extinction of the wolf once native to the Kline Range? Why did it not require the extinction of the wild boar native to the same region? Answer as one question."

Thirty seconds later, the Climicon computer said, "Heavy data. May we stat it, or do you require a vocalized report?"

"Stat it."

Another thirty seconds passed before the long yellow sheets of paper chattered out of the slot in the base of the telephone stand. There were six of them.

"Terminated."

"Thank you." He hung up.

He carried the papers to the easy chair by the opaqued patio doors, palmed the glass panels into transparency again, and sat down to read. The first sheet dealt with the wild boar: Climicon's study of its ferocity and the determination, after exhaustive research, that the species should be maintained, though in smaller herds than was natural for them. The boar, it turned out, was a coward as well, toothed and clawed to little purpose when it came to a confrontation with anything much larger than itself; it preferred to run away from men rather than fight them. The wolf, however, was something else altogether, a real gladiator. It not only seemed fanatically compelled to attack creatures larger than itself, men included, but it also transmitted a deadly bacterial infection. The Climicon report was either purposefully vague on this point or was based on insufficient evidence. It did little more than list the symptoms and the mortality rate among the victims of the disease. Symptoms: loss of weight; high fever; destruction of red blood cells by some unknown agent and a corresponding need for iron; an aversion to sunlight that, in the beginning, is neurotic but which soon becomes physical, as the victim is nearly totally blinded in all but the most dimly lighted rooms. Patients suffered extremely intense nightmares, too, the report said. And periods of insanity when they growled and groveled on the floor like animals, exhibiting an unnatural strength when provoked. One in three died during the second week of illness; two in three survived, after prolonged hospitalization, without injury. The last known case of the sickness had been reported eleven years ago. The report also listed a large number of laboratory studies of the disease, naming doctors and lab assistants. St. Cyr found nothing interesting in this and put the papers down.

Considering the symptoms of the disease—especially the aversion to light, the growling and groveling, the unnatural strength, the nightmares—it is easy

to see how the legend of the du-aga-klava, wolf-in-man's-skin, was born.

Unless it's more than a simple disease.

Illogical.

St. Cyr picked the sheets up and read through them again. He could not find any mention of a cure for the disease or even whether the bacteria had been isolated and identified. He rather thought Climicon had not had any luck. If they had, the data would be there.

Many diseases are still incurable. The lack of this data does not have any bearing on the case at hand.

Perhaps not. Not unless there is more to Dane Alderban's notion than would at first seem likely.

Illogical.

St. Cyr sat in the chair by the door, in the gentle morning light, thinking about the report from Climicon, the murder of Betty Alderban, his conversation with Tina, Hirschel's resemblance to a wolf (*Immaterial*)—*not* thinking about the nightmare or the paranoid seizure of the night before. Soon it was time to join Dane in the garage for the trip into the mountains where they were to see Norya, the gypsy woman.

Unnecessary diversion.

He got up and went downstairs anyway.

SEVEN: *The Gypsy Camp*

The vehicle that Dane chose for the ride to the gypsy camp looked formidable enough to last through any natural catastrophe and still manage to forge ahead: a heavy-duty Rover with triple-axle, six-wheel drive; double-thick body sheeting; running boards; a reinforced roof; heavy, tempered plexiglass windscreen in two liquid-separated layers; an auxiliary fuel cell; and a spare, shielded pair of headlights. The family rarely used the car, Dane explained, except when one of them wanted to go into the mountains where the roads were in a particularly primitive condition. Now and again, Tina drove into the mountains to paint a landscape; Dane drove up the slopes to meet his Darmanian friends; and Hirschel, when he visited during the cooler months, liked to ride up to the ice plateaus, where he played little games of chance with snow-hidden crevasses.

At first, the trail was pleasant enough, a narrow gravel track that led into the foothills behind the mansion. Here the pines were scarce, but slowly thickened as they gained altitude, and came to stand near the roadway as if they were waiting for the Rover to pass. When the way angled to the left or right, and they momentarily paralleled the valley instead of climbing out of it, St. Cyr turned and enjoyed the panoramic view, saw sections of the Alderban house gleaming like milky jewels in the lush green land.

He grew uneasy, however, as they rose into the last foothills and then onto the broken slopes of the mountains themselves. Here the pines were replaced by the odd gray-leafed trees that spread concealing branches over the road and brought a false dusk.

When St. Cyr asked what the trees were called, Dane said, "These are Dead Men."

"Because of their color?"

"Partly that." He hunched against the wheel and took his eyes from the road long enough to look at the low-hanging branches. "There's a native legend that says the souls of the dead pass from their graves into the roots of these trees, are drawn up the tree and sprout as leaves on the branches. When a leaf falls, it is indication that a dead man has been released from—well, purgatory."

"Quite fanciful."

"Anyway, since the natives call the trees Dead Men, we colonists have done the same. Somehow, even without the legend, it seems to fit them."

St. Cyr leaned back and stared at the road, trying to forget the trees. "Anyway, I wish it were autumn. I could do without this sort of foliage."

"They're never without leaves—except for two weeks in early spring and two more in late autumn. They grow two complete sets of cover in each calendar year."

"No rest for Dead Men."

"That's it."

The trees closed in as if in response, blocked the sun as the road grew worse. The graveled path had abruptly given way to a muddy dirt track full of ruts, potholes and sucking pits of black muck. The Rover plowed forward through it all, whined as it shifted its own gears, roared farther up into the mountains, where it was always early evening.

Two hours later, Dane said, "Not much farther now."

They had traveled slightly more than forty miles on a hideously inadequate switchback road that always appeared to be crumbling dangerously on the outer edge whenever it was flanked by a precipice of any depth. Now, far up the mountain but beginning to descend into a hidden pocket in its interior, they left the valley and the last vestiges of daylight far behind. A roof lay over them, a great arch of gray leaves interlaced like handwoven thatch. Now and again a hole opened in that canopy, never larger than a yard square and generally much smaller than that. Where there was a break in the cover, the sunlight came down like liquid, cutting straight through the unrelieved darkness and illuminating only the spot on which it splashed.

Dane had long ago turned on the headlights. The road had gotten progressively worse until it occasionally dropped a foot or more without warning. They ran into cross-ruts that jolted them like railroad ties, or like regular waves smashing beneath a ship.

"If you've got to have werewolves," St. Cyr said, "this is the best place for them."

Dane glanced at him, perplexed at his tone, decided not to answer.

"Doesn't the family have a helicopter—with all else it has?"

"Yes," Dane said.

"Why not come up here in that?"

"We couldn't put down anywhere nearer the village than an hour's walk; the trees are everywhere in these altitudes."

St. Cyr closed his eyes and imagined that he was somewhere else, anywhere else.

Shortly, Dane said, "Here we are."

St. Cyr opened his eyes and saw a tiny round valley, the brink of which they had just passed. Dozens of neat campfires filled it, threw flickering shadows on colorfully painted trucks, trailers and tents. Now and then, as fuel was added to a fire and the flames leapt higher, a tongue of yellow light licked the low, gray roof of vegetation, ruining the illusion of a vast hall with a ceiling several miles overhead.

"I'll bet Norya's expecting us," Dane said.

St. Cyr had not seen him this enthusiastic before, grinning, his eyes bright.

"You sent word that we'd be coming?" St. Cyr asked.

"No. But Norya will know about us. She has certain powers..."

The intelligent species native to Darma was not, in appearance at least,

greatly different from mankind. They were of the same approximate height as a man, and of similar weights. They walked on two legs, one knee joint per limb, and they had two arms and two hands for the manipulation of tools. Each hand had six fingers, though this deviation from the expected was so inconspicuous as to hardly cause comment. They were dark-skinned, but so were a number of races of mankind. All of them that St. Cyr encountered were dark-haired, though they may have harbored a few blonds among them. Their eyes seemed either to be gray, the same shade as the leaves on the Dead Men, or a startling amber that caught the firelight like cat's eyes. Their ears lay flat against the skull and contained very little cartilage. Their noses were short, flattened, the nostrils somewhat ragged. Their mouths were not rimmed with lips but were sudden, dark gashes in the lower third of their faces, placed somewhat closer to the chin than in a human face. When they spoke Empire English, as St. Cyr and Dane did, their words were muffled, drawn thin and flat by the lack of lips to help shape the vowels. Their own language was one of consonants, clicks, and whistles that sounded to St. Cyr even more complex than formal Mandarin Chinese.

As the cyberdetective and the Alderban boy passed between the gaudy tents and trucks, walking briskly toward the silver trailer in which Norya lived, the Darmanians smiled and nodded, spoke an occasional greeting—but were, on the whole, watchful.

St. Cyr saw now that they had larger eyes than men, with enormous, pebbly lids.

They moved with feline grace as they passed the men, and often they seemed to go out of their way to avoid encountering the humans.

As they reached the silver trailer, the door opened. A stocky man, clearly of Earth-normal human blood, came down three metal steps and brushed by them without a word. He wore a full beard, odd in this day of electrolytic beard removal at puberty, and that bush of facial hair made his scowl seem twice as fierce as it was.

"Who's he?" St. Cyr asked.

"His name's Salardi. He came here with a team of archaeologists who were researching some native ruins, and when his job was done he decided to stay."

"A wealthy man?"

"No. He lives with the natives, eats off the land."

Salardi turned the corner at an orange and blue tent and disappeared.

"He doesn't seem to be happy here."

Dane said, "The word is that he's wanted in connection with a crime of some sort in the Inner Galaxy. He joined the scientific expedition to get free passage out here toward the rim, away from the Founding Worlds' laws." He started forward again, turned and said, "Come on. Norya's waiting."

Remember Salardi.

I will.

At the trailer door, which stood open, an old woman's voice greeted them before they had started up the steps. "Welcome, Dane. Please bring your

detective friend inside."

Dane turned and smiled at St. Cyr. "You see? She has powers."

They went up the metal steps and into the main room of the trailer, closed the door after them. They stood in a candle-light chamber, the odor of incense heavy on the air. The furniture here looked hand-carved, each piece made from a massive block of wood. Dead Men wood? St. Cyr wondered. In the largest of the chairs, at the far end of the room, sitting with a blanket across her lap and legs, Norya waited for them.

"Here," she said, indicating a pair of chairs directly in front of her.

They sat down.

St. Cyr found it difficult to put an age to the alien face before him, though he was certain that Norya was old, inestimably old. Her eyes were nested in dark wrinkles; furrows cut her brown cheeks like wounds, bracketed her slit mouth. Her dark hair had long ago turned white, and it fell in ropy clumps over her narrow shoulders. When she smiled at St. Cyr, her lipless mouth looked like a gash made by a sharp knife.

"Norya, this is—"

Keeping her gaze fixed on the cyberdetective, she said, "Baker St. Cyr. I know. I've seen this entire meeting in a vision." Her voice was webbed with tiny cracks, like a piece of crumpled isinglass, yet it was loud enough and clear enough to be easily heard.

"What are these—visions like?" St. Cyr asked.

"They come to me at odd moments, when I am unprepared. It is as though, for a few minutes or hours, I am living in the future, not the present." She unfolded her six-fingered hands and placed one on each arm of the chair, as if she were bracing herself. "But you did not come here to hear about my visions. You want to know about the *du-aga-klava*."

"Yes"—St. Cyr.

"Please, Norya"—Dane.

"Move your chairs nearer me," she said.

They did this.

"Put a hand over my hand."

St. Cyr covered her left hand, Dane her right.

Her hands were warm and dry.

She closed her eyes.

"Now what?" St. Cyr asked.

"Now I show you the wolf." Crumpled isinglass.

It began insidiously, with a steady dimming of the candles. St. Cyr looked around the room and saw that none of the tapers had been touched—and yet they threw considerably less light than they had only a moment ago. And what light there was had changed from yellow to a gray-green shade that depressed him.

"It happened in my fourteenth year, in the autumn, before the leaves fell,

many decades ago." Norya's voice was no more than a strained whisper now, faint, scratchy.

St. Cyr looked back at her, expecting some kind of change, though he could not guess what. She was the same as she had been: old.

He felt a breeze across his face, cool and pleasant.

When he turned to see if the trailer door had been opened, he found that he could no longer see a door. Midpoint in its length, the room grew hazy and metamorphosed into a forest, the slick trunks of the Dead Men rising on every side, sparse vegetation tangled across the woodland floor.

A telepathic projectionist.

Yes, St. Cyr thought. And she's a good one.

A moment later, the entire room was gone. He could not see Dane or Norya any longer. He was a disembodied observer, standing several feet above the earth, watching what unfolded at the gypsy camp below.

He saw a child playing in the forest a quarter of a mile from the last of the tents and trailers, a boy no more than seven years old, darting in and out of peculiar rock formations, poking into cul-de-sacs in hopes of finding some adventure. St. Cyr was aware that the boy was Norya's brother. In one of his spelunking efforts, he came across a cavelet that served as a wolf's den. It was occupied. Terrified at the confrontation with the wolf, the boy turned and ran. He did not get too far from the den before the wolf was upon him. Much larger than the boy, the wolf sank teeth into his shoulder and dragged him down. They skidded on fallen leaves, rolled, the boy screaming and the wolf snarling furiously as he worked at the hold he had secured... Since the camp was so close by, several men soon reached the boy and drove away the wolf. Though they carried guns, and though several were good marksmen who placed bullets in the wolf, it loped away, apparently unharmed. The *du-aga-klava*, unlike the ordinary wolf, can only be brought down with weapons that have been coated with the sap of the Dead Men... The rescuers carried the boy back to camp, where physicians stopped the bleeding and bandaged his arm. He had entered a coma, however, and he did not rise out of it for nearly two and a half weeks—except those times when his mother came upon him groveling on the floor like an animal. When she tried to touch him and put him to bed, he snapped at her, snarled like the wolf that had bit him. When these seizures took him, there was nothing to do but wait until they passed and unconsciousness again claimed him. Then he would be put to bed again. The leaves fell from the Dead Men, souls expelled from purgatory into heaven... The air grew cooler as winter approached. For long days the camp was bathed in light—the whole while that the boy lay stricken... When the new leaves had interlaced and the familiar canopy of darkness lay over them once more, the boy began to improve. He no longer howled, and did not snap at his loved ones; he had ceased to froth at the mouth. He had lost a great deal of weight, but he gained it back swiftly, his appetite ravenous. Completely out of his comatose state now, he slowly grew tolerant of bright lights, though he shied away from them when it was at all possible to do so, always choosing to sit in the most dimly lighted corner. Within another month, his sickness was all but forgotten, except when the family prayed and gave thanks for his recovery. At

about this time, the first of the children was attacked and killed by a wolf. It happened at night, when some of the children were playing a form of hide-and-seek in the backlot of the trailers, while the adults were all in towards the center of the camp for a celebration. A week later another child was killed, also at night, but this time while he slept alone in his mother's tent. Though the men banded together to hunt down the rogue wolf, they found no trace of the animal. All the nearby dens had been deserted earlier as the animals moved into the low country for the winter. Soon they began to murmur among themselves, form theories based on legends. The wolf, they said, was more than an ordinary wolf. The third child to be attacked was playing with Norya's brother when the wolf jumped her. According to the boy, he frightened the beast off before it could do the girl much harm. She was hysterical, but spoke lucidly enough to point the finger at the boy. He was the wolf, she said. They had been playing, and suddenly he jumped her and he had fangs and his hands had become claws, and he had almost killed her... It was necessary, then, to execute the boy by forcing him to consume a cup of poison made from the bark of the Dead Men. And when he was gone, there were no more murders, no more—

The vision of the dead boy—face contorted by the poison, eyes staring sightlessly at the ceiling of the tent—faded from view, as if his flesh were nothing more than smoke.

It was, of course, even less than that.

Beyond the tent, the green-gray forest melted.

Reality intruded: heavy furniture, flickering candles, an old woman with a blanket across her knees...

"I would like to know—" St. Cyr began.

Dane said, "She's sleeping."

"When will she wake?"

"Perhaps not until morning. It was a hard thing for her to do, but she knew she had to warn us."

"What now?"

"We leave. What else?"

Outside, they stood against a thick Dead Man's trunk and breathed the stale air out of their lungs. "It meant nothing," St. Cyr said.

"How can you say that?" Dane turned to face him, angry. "You saw how the weapons had no effect on the wolf that bit her brother."

"The marksmen were nervous—at least, they were in the re-creation that we saw. They could easily have missed and sworn they hit to preserve their reputations."

"What about his sickness?"

"The same sickness that everyone got when bitten by a wolf. They carried bacteria. I have the report on them from Climicon."

"What about the aversion to light?"

"A symptom in many diseases where the eye may be infected."

Dane shook his head violently. "But that's not all. What about the second child who was killed, the one sleeping in a tent? Would a wild animal enter a civilized habitat for prey?"

"It might. It's more probable than Norya's werewolf."

"And the fact that the men searched but could find no wolf in the neighborhood?"

"They did not search well enough. Or it eluded them."

Dane said, "What about the child's story, the little girl who was nearly the third victim?"

"She knew she was playing with Norya's brother," St. Cyr explained patiently. "She was not expecting anything else. When the wolf jumped her, she became hysterical. She saw the boy driving it off, and in her hysteria, having heard the rumors about a *du-aga-klava*, it all became twisted in her mind until the boy was the wolf, the wolf was the boy."

"That's a shaky explanation, don't you think?"

"No," St. Cyr said. "When you're a detective for long, you learn that no witness ever reports things quite the way they were; sometimes they don't get it remotely as it was. A child of the girl's age is an even more unreliable source of information."

"You're saying they killed an innocent boy, one who wasn't possessed?"

"I'm afraid it looks that way to me."

Dane struck one palm with the other fist. "But, dammit, you saw him metamorphosing into a wolf. You saw him trying to tear out the girl's throat!"

"No, all that I saw was Norya's re-creation of the way she *thought* it was. She was not present when the little girl was attacked; she was only replaying it as she was told it had happened."

"But she sees the future clearly—why not the past too?"

"She's precognitive, yes. But, like most precogs, she can't make use of that power at will—let alone employ it to dredge up bits of the past at which she was not ever present. She's a telepathic projectionist, Dane, one who produced some colorful fantasies for us, nothing more."

"I think you're wrong."

"I think I'm not. But I'm still glad that I came with you. Up until now, I had given the *du-aga-klava* theory more credence than it deserved—if only in the sense that I considered the possibility of a wolf-transmitted lycanthropic bacterium. Now, having seen the quality of the facts upon which these legends are built, I've rejected the werewolf notion altogether."

A fine decision.

Dane didn't agree with the bio-computer's analysis. "You'll see yet," he said. "Norya is right; I'm sure she is."

St. Cyr said, "I'm also glad I came along because I got to meet Salardi. Or I will meet him. Which tent or trailer is his?"

"There," Dane said, pointing to a yellow and green tent painted in swirling, abstract patterns. "But what do you want from him?"

"It's occurred to me that a man running from a criminal offense in the Inner Galaxy, living only a couple of hours from your house, might be a likely suspect."

"What would Salardi have against us? We hardly know him."

"Perhaps he has nothing against you. Let's go see if we can find out, though." He walked off toward the gaily colored tent.

Salardi came to the flap the second time they called his name, pushed through, and stood before them, obviously determined not to invite them inside. "What is it?" he asked.

St. Cyr introduced himself, though he saw Salardi's eyes narrow at the mention of "detective."

"I wonder if you'd mind answering a few questions."

Salardi wiped at his beard, thinking it over, looked at Dane, then said, "Go ahead. I'll tell you when I've heard enough of them."

"How long have you lived with the gypsies?"

"Four years."

"You're an archaeologist?"

"No."

"But I understood you came here with—"

"I'm a roboticist by profession, an archaeologist by avocation. I came with the expedition to oversee their limited-response robots."

"And you remained behind."

Salardi said nothing.

"Why do you stay here, among those of another species, without any of the comforts of modern life?"

"I like them; that's it. As simple as that. I think they've gotten a lousy deal from the fedgov right down the line. I'd rather live among them than among my own kind. My own kind shame me."

"How have they gotten a lousy deal?" St. Cyr asked.

Salardi folded his arms across his barrel chest and said, "The fedgov always says that planets are colonized without war. I found, when I was with the diggers here, that there had been a war, a damn short and violent war, when the Darmanians were dispossessed. They were primitive, but with a high degree of artistic achievement and the most carefully structured social system I've ever seen. We knocked them down, killed more than half of them, and let another quarter die out from Earth-borne diseases. That's long in the past now, but it still haunts me. What we did here was inexcusable. Do you know that these people did not know anything of war before we came? There were perhaps half a billion of them across the globe, and they never once took arms against each other. The fedgov's war of annexation was grotesque. In two months, only two hundred thousand natives remained. And then the disease... And now that it's clear that violence against other intelligent creatures is beyond them, the fedgov lets them go, lets them wander in quasi-poverty on a planet made over for the rich. *That* is how they've gotten a lousy

deal."

The man spoke with the fiery eloquence of a fanatic on the subject. St. Cyr used his present lack of emotional balance to ask him: "Then you aren't running from criminal prosecution in the Inner Galaxy, as everyone says?"

Salardi dropped his arms and balled his fists at his side. His face colored suddenly. "I've heard enough questions," he said. He turned and entered his tent, pulled the flap shut and tied it down from within.

Dane brooded on the ride down from the gypsy camp, drove too fast for the condition of the road. St. Cyr ignored him, trusting to Fate and the boy's own desire to live to get them safely home again.

When they had been driving for an hour, Dane suddenly spoke: "What about the fits the boy threw when he was sick—snapping at people and growling like an animal?"

"It's a common symptom of the disease, according to Climicon. It sounds like a relative of an epileptic fit."

"I knew that thing on your chest would keep you blind to the truth. It's trying to apply logic where logic wasn't meant to be."

"But the logic is working," St. Cyr observed.

"Who in hell do you suspect, St. Cyr? Who is a better potential killer than the *du-aga-klava*? Who would have reasons?"

"Several people," St. Cyr said. "And I'm adding Salardi to the list."

"Why him?"

"Because he's a fanatic about the treatment accorded the natives by the fedgov. Understandable, of course, and all of it as deplorable as he thinks it is. But a fanatic might very well decide that the best way to strike back in behalf of the non-violent Darmanians is to start killing the wealthy people who have inherited this world."

"He's had four years to start. Why begin now?"

"Perhaps it took four years to build up a keen edge of madness."

Dane said nothing more.

Eventually they left the gray trees behind and passed through the lower foothills where the pines grew. The sunlight was welcome, the sky cheerfully cloudless.

St. Cyr's mood was considerably better than it had been that morning. He had even begun to enjoy the scenery again—until they came within sight of the five-level white mansion. Then he realized that, though he had ruled out the possibility of a werewolf to his own satisfaction, he had yet to explain the discovery of wolf hairs on two of the three corpses.

EIGHT: *Encounter with a Wolf*

Chief Inspector Rainy, whom St. Cyr called that same day, confirmed Salardi's means of arrival on Darma and the reasons he claimed for remaining there. Yes, they had checked with Inner Galaxy police. No, they had not turned up anything of interest Salardi was printed, as were all citizens, but he had no warrants outstanding against him. Similar calls to fedgov agencies produced the same results. No, the Darmanian police had not discounted the rumors altogether. It was still possible that Salardi was on the run from an industrial police force. The largest companies maintained their own protection systems—sometimes their own armies—and, when they employed a million or more people, often had their own sets of laws. Salardi could have been employed by a gargantuan industry, could have broken their plant laws somehow, and could be on the run from a private police force. That was next to impossible to check out, considering the hundreds of industrial worlds and the thousands of companies with their own laws and police. Besides, it was out of Rainy's jurisdiction. St. Cyr promised to call in a couple of days and hung up.

Two more days passed in which he did not achieve anything—except a better understanding of Tina Alderban, whom he found himself spending too much time with. She seemed, with every moment that he was around her, increasingly beautiful, stirring needs in him that he had ignored for quite a long while. At night, when nightmares came, she was not in them—but when he woke, it somehow seemed to him that she was nevertheless connected to them in some fashion. He knew that the stalker in his dream was not Tina, but some connection...

On the evening of the second day after he and Dane had returned from the gypsy camp, he was in Tina's studio looking over a new piece of work that she had almost finished. As they stood side-by-side before the canvas, he thought that he detected an attitude of longing in her that mirrored or at least resembled his own. He turned away from the painting—which she had evidenced disgust with—and took her in his arms, pulled her against him, kissed her. When she responded, her tongue moving between his lips, he let his hands slip slowly down her back until they cupped the full roundness of her buttocks. They stood that way for a long while, going no further, requiring nothing more than that. For St. Cyr it was a revelation, for he reacted to the girl in far more than a physical way. He wanted to protect her, to hold her against him and share everything that was to come in the future. He was startled by the ferocity of his commitment (*Avoid emotional ties.*) and then, subsequently, hurt when she stepped away from him and adjusted her blouse, which had slipped out of her shorts.

She said, "You still think I can care for someone, form a normal human relationship?"

"More than ever."

She looked weary. "Then it isn't you. I thought it might be you, but we

can't ever be that close."

His mouth was dry when he said, "What? Why not?"

"You're—cold," she said. "Like all the rest of us in this house. You hold back; you don't give yourself. To care, I've got to have someone who can go more than halfway, who can teach me."

"I can," he insisted.

"No. You're too logical, too reserved. It's that bio-computer, I suppose, that makes you that way."

"I can take it off."

"Are you any different when you do?"

"Of course."

"Perhaps you are, subtly," she said, "But I think that the basic coldness remains."

"I'm as emotional as any other man, outside of my cyberdetective role." It had been a long time since anyone had made him feel defensive.

"When you aren't wearing that shell?"

"Yes," he said.

"How often do you wear it?"

"Only when I'm working."

"How often are you on a case?"

"Oh—on the average, three weeks a month or so."

"And you never wear it between assignments?"

"Hardly ever."

"Hardly ever? What does that mean? Sometimes you wear it when you aren't working?"

He remembered the way the customs men had looked at him, their certainty that he depended on the bio-computer shell for his very existence. He did not want to see the same expression on her face. Yet he could not tell her anything but the truth. "Sometimes—I leave it on a day or two past the conclusion of a case."

She turned away from him and looked back at her new painting. "That shell you wear makes you as hollow as the rest of us, as flat and selfish as someone who has been hypno-keyed."

After that, there had been no opportunity to get her in his arms again. He had left her studio shaken, and had experienced the worst nightmare in many years toward the dawn of the next morning.

Rising early because of the nightmare, he bathed and dressed and went into the gardens to inspect the site of Dorothea's murder. He had been there before, as had the police, but he planned this time to make concentric circles around the spot, constantly widening his search pattern until he either found something they had overlooked before or had been from one end of the gardens to the other without luck. Besides, it was something to do while he waited for the killer to make his next move.

The place where the girl's body had been found was still marked by the chemicals the police had used to force the earth to give up secrets—before they discovered it had none to give up. The grass was dead, though tiny green shoots from new seeds had begun to peek out of the ugly stain. St. Cyr moved quickly around the site, covering the ground that he had been over once before, then slowed his pace as he came upon untrodden flowerbeds and walkways where neither he nor the police had done much work.

It was tedious work, but at least it kept his mind occupied while the sun climbed into the sky and began to eat away the empty hours.

Just when he was beginning to miss the breakfast he had not taken time to eat, his legs weary from more than two hours of continuous pacing, the killer made his next move. Something stung St. Cyr in the center of his back, sent warmth through the upper half of his body.

He fell forward to avoid a second shot, if there happened to be one; he hit the earth hard, the shock against the bio-computer shell carried swiftly against his ribs. Unfortunately, the shell was far tougher than he was and did not cushion any of the blow. He scrambled forward toward a line of hedges behind which he could have a little bit of shelter. As he was scrambling through the hedgerow, scratching his face and hands on the brambles, a second dart pricked his right buttock.

On the other side of the hedge, he plucked the long, slim needles from his back and looked at them closely. They were thicker in the middle than on either end and had only a single point, with an almost microscopic hole in the very tip. The charge was held in the middle, in the rounded bulge no wider than a quarter of an inch and about one inch long.

Charge of what, though? Narcotics? If that were the case, then he was in a damn bad way. Strangely, he had not passed out immediately, as he should have. But if he had just been narco-darted, he only had a few precious seconds to do something to save himself.

Had Leon, Dorothea and Betty been snapped full of narcotics before the killer made his move against them? No, that would have showed up in an autopsy.

Perhaps he had not just been sedated, but poisoned. Perhaps in a moment he would go into violent convulsions.

He rolled onto his stomach and wriggled a *dozen* feet along the hedgerow, spread some of the tightly-packed branches and surveyed the trees and flowers and shrubs across the way. He could not see anyone lurking there. He thought he would have heard them if they had tried to circle him, but he looked behind anyway. The gardens there were also serene.

St. Cyr was still not sleepy.

That worried him.

What the hell was going on?

Your perceptions seem to be deteriorating, the bio-computer said.

"I feel all right."

He should not have spoken so loudly. He did not even need to vocalize

communications with the bio-computer pack. Besides, his voice carried remarkably well in the heavily-grown gardens, echoing down the sheltered flagstone walkways.

It is currently only a subtle deterioration.

Poison, he thought.

He got to his knees and stood without much trouble, though for a second or two it seemed to him that the ground had rippled, risen towards him in an effort to keep him from getting away. That was imagination, of course. Looking quickly around, he tried to gauge the nearest exit from the artificial jungle. If he could make the open lawn around the mansion, someone might see him and come to him before it was too late.

Behind him, a pathway led toward the perimeter of the garden, arched over with green leaves and red blossoms that smelled like oranges. He started for that and was halfway to the walk entrance when he saw the leaves snake quickly forward, growing at a fantastic rate. In two seconds the exit had been sealed off by vegetation.

"What the hell—"

He turned right, starred for another walkway, watched the same thing happen, except that this time it was the grass that grew swiftly to cover the entrance. The blades widened as they grew, toughened, twined rapidly in and out of the side-poles of the rose arbor which framed the entrance to the walk, forming an impassable barrier.

St. Cyr turned and faced the other way.

The hedge behind which he had hidden only a few minutes ago had begun to join in with the harmony of growth—no, the cacophony. It sprouted new branches. Actually, they looked more like vines, highly flexible vines covered with wicked inch-long thorns. A dozen of these ropy tentacles had almost reached him. As he watched, they rose from the ground like snakes responding to the music of a flute, stood higher and higher still until they towered over him.

At the last instant he realized what they intended. They would fall and embrace him, squeeze him firmly in a crosshatch of thorns. He screamed, fell, rolled to the left barely fast enough to avoid them as they dropped where he had been.

The vines thrashed agitatedly.

He could hear things growing all around him, bursting forth like gardens he had seen filmed with stop-action photography.

He got up and ran.

He passed through the entrance to another walkway before he noticed it, and he was elated that, unconsciously, he had fooled the garden. He was on his way out of it.

Hallucinations.

He paid no attention to the bio-computer now. He was in no mood to listen to anything except the incredible roar of growing things, which he fancied was as loud as the continuous explosion at the base of a major waterfalls.

Be calm. Hallucination.

On both sides the trees shot up, growing so fast that they would soon punch out the sky.

"Sky" is basically an abstract term. You are hallucinating.

He had gone a hundred feet down the flagstone path when, immediately before him in the leaping, dancing chaos of the garden, a silver and black wolf appeared. It was larger than he was, and it was bearing down on him.

He tried to side-step; could not.

Silver claws slashed down across his shoulder, dug deep, ripped loose, carried away a spray of blood.

He stumbled and fell.

The wolf swept by him, turned to attack again.

This is no hallucination, St. Cyr thought. Not this part about the wolf. The wolf is real.

Affirmed.

He didn't need to have it affirmed. He felt as if he had lost his arm, though he could look at it and see that it was still there, gushing blood but still attached.

The wolf swooped in at him, moving so quickly and gracefully that it seemed almost to have wings.

He twisted.

The claws caught his shirt, ripped it, passed by.

"Help!"

The word sounded alien, as if someone else had spoken it. He looked around, saw he was alone, realized it was himself that had called out. "Help! Help!"

He had no way of knowing how loud it was. His voice might have been a whisper. His altered perceptions, however, told him it sounded like an amplified scream. Indeed, each time he shouted he could see the sound waves spiraling outward from his mouth, some of them catching on the trees and shattering there, others spearing right through the growth and carrying on, seeking ears. The shattered sounds lay on the grass like broken bottles, gleaming green and yellow.

The wolf came back, got its claws into him again, into the same shoulder as before, tore, twisted, snarled loudly as its grip broke and blood spattered.

He remembered that Dorothea had one arm torn off and was missing several toes.

Suddenly, above the sound of the growing plants and above the hissing, growling fury of the wolf, something boomed with the impact of a ton of rock dropped on a sheet of tin.

He felt the sound of it smash down on all sides, covering up the broken-bottle sounds of his own voice.

The glittering fragments of this sound were bright red, like blood, broken

sound... on all sides of him...

He looked up from the glass blood that was *really* sound, and he saw that the wolf was gone. He looked behind, but he did not see it in that direction either. Of course, as rapidly as the grass was growing, and considering all the violence with which the thorned vines had attacked St. Cyr, the garden might very well have swallowed the beast.

When he turned front again he saw Hirschel running toward him, carrying what appeared to be a rifle. So it was Hirschel, after all. It was that simple. Somehow, Hirschel had obtained a trained wolf that he was using to do his dirty work—straight out of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Any self-respecting detective should have been familiar with the ruse. Of course, in that story there had been no shattered sound lying around like broken glass, and there had not been trees growing right up through the top of the sky... He had a lot more to contend with here than Holmes ever had.

Hirschel stopped and bent over him.

"Very neat," St. Cyr said.

Then he passed out.

NINE: *Bloodhounds*

When he sat straight up in bed, chased awake by the stalker on the broken road, Tina was there to quiet him. She pushed gently against his chest until he lay down again, then sat on the edge of the water mattress.

"How do you feel?"

He licked his lips and found them salty. The inside of his mouth was dry and tasted like dust. "A drink?" he asked.

She got him water, watched him drink, asked if he wanted more, took the glass back into the bathroom when he said he was done. He watched her go, well enough to be fascinated by the movement of her tight round behind.

When she returned, he said, "Where's Hirschel?"

"In the garden, with Inspector Rainy. They've been scouring the area where it happened."

"Is he under arrest?"

She looked surprised. "Whatever for?"

"Wasn't he the one who tried to kill me—he and his trained wolf?"

She started to smile, stopped, said, "If it hadn't been for Uncle Hirschel, you might be dead. He heard you screaming for help, and when he thought he might not reach you in time, he fired his rifle in hopes he would scare off whatever was after you."

"What was he doing there with a rifle in the first place?" He didn't want to sound quarrelsome, but he did. His head ached so badly that he almost reached up to see if it was all there.

"He was on his way across the gardens. He intended to go down into the valley to hunt for deer, some of the small fast ones that he's never been lucky with so far."

"He saw the wolf?"

"He says not. It was gone when he reached you."

St. Cyr raised his right hand and reached for the wounded left shoulder; he encountered a thick mass of bandages. He did not have any pain in his shoulder. All the pain was in his head, smack in the center of his forehead. He raised his good hand and felt his forehead, but couldn't find anything out of place, any hole or foot-long arrow sticking out of his skull.

He said, "What did the doctor say about my arm? Claw wound?"

"There wasn't any doctor here," Tina said. "Not, at least, in the sense you mean. We have an autodoc in the library. We fed you into it, asked for a diagnosis, and let the robotic surgeons do the rest."

"How long have I been out?"

She looked at her watch. "Hirschel found you at ten-thirty. You've been unconscious slightly more than six hours. It's now twenty minutes of five."

"What hit me?"

"Drugs of some sort. Inspector Rainy knows all about that. I'll let him fill you in."

St. Cyr suddenly reached to his chest, felt the lines of a human body. "What happened to the shell?"

"We had to take it off to put you in the autodoc receival tray. Hell of a delay figuring out how to remove it. You could have bled to death."

"Will you help me up?"

"Of course not!" she snapped. "Jesus, you're a first-class masochist!"

He smiled, though he didn't want to smile. "I have a job to do; I get a high by-the-day fee."

"You're too racked up to go running around the garden any more just now. Relax."

"I wasn't going to run anywhere. But I could do some clearer thinking if I had the bio-computer data banks to help."

She stood up and crossed the room to the easy chair, picked up the shell and carried it back to the bed. "I don't think you really need this at all right now; you just *want* it."

"I need it," he said.

"You know what I said before."

"Yes."

"I think you rely on it too much. I know you do. Why do you have to face the world so logically? Why can't you break down and be human now and then? I won't say, 'like the rest of us,' because you know how messed up I am. But when you are an emotional creature, when hypno-keying hasn't ruined you, why fall back on this damn thing?"

"I think you're beginning to care about me," he said. "See, I told you it was possible, that you had the capacity."

"Bullshit," she said, handing him the shell as he sat up in bed again. "Do you need help?"

"No."

"Then I'll leave. I don't want to see those damned holes in your chest again."

When she was at the open door between his bedroom and the sitting room, he called to her. "Tell Rainy to come and see me, will you?"

"He already asked me to tell him when you came around."

"Thank you."

But she was gone.

St. Cyr turned the shell on its back, pulled out the two cords that terminated in male jacks, plugged them into the female receptacles in his chest. For a moment he almost stopped at that point, almost unplugged the shell and put it away. Why couldn't it wait until morning? It couldn't wait until morning simply because of the nightmares... But the bio-computer was

always bothering him when it attempted to analyze his dreams, wasn't it? Wouldn't it be pleasant to have a reprieve from the inevitable psychoanalysis? He reminded himself that the computer itself did not comment on the dreams. The computer was only a compact data bank and logic circuitry. He used it, and he produced results. When it talked to him, he was actually talking to himself, no matter how much like a dialogue the unspoken conversation seemed. Therefore, it was not as great a weakness to rely on the shell as Tina thought it was; in a way, he was only relying on himself. And without the logic circuits, the nightmares would be far worse, terrifying... He lifted the shell against his chest, flicked the switch. In a minute it had thoroughly tapped his body.

"Hello?" Inspector Rainy called from the other room.

"In here," St. Cyr replied.

The policeman walked into the room, wiping at his thick hair with one pink hand. He seemed to be dressed exactly as he was the first time St. Cyr had seen him, his clothes still rumpled and frayed at the cuffs. "Feeling well enough to talk?"

"I asked for you."

Rainy nodded, dragged a chair close to the bed, sat down. Though he was plump, he looked positively diminutive in the chair, like a troll or an over-fed elf. He gripped the arms of the chair until his knuckles were white, though he gave no other indication that he was ill-at-ease. He was probably trying not to brush his hair back, St. Cyr decided.

"Find anything?" St. Cyr asked.

"The empty darts that got you."

"What was in them?"

"TDX-4, a perfectly legal hallucinogen."

"Why not a narcotic that would have completely disabled me?"

"Perhaps the killer didn't have access to it."

"I'm assuming," St. Cyr said, "that the person who attacked me is a member of the family. There are three narcotic-dart pistols floating around to protect them from the killer."

Rainy leaned forward in his chair, wiped his hair; he looked much less like a troll when he sensed something that applied to the chase. "Who has these pistols?"

"Jubal and Alicia share one. Dane has another, and Tina."

"Not Hirschel? He's the gun man, after all."

"They're his pistols, but he gave them to the others when it was clear that Jubal frowned on deadly weapons. He prefers a projectile weapon anyway, I suppose."

"He only had the three?"

"So he said."

"But he might have concealed a fourth? Then, when he used it, he would be directing the suspicion elsewhere."

"Perhaps. But Tina tells me that it was Hirschel who saved me. I have distorted recollections of the same thing."

Rainy frowned and started back into his troll pose, then sat up again and said, "Suppose Hirschel has a good reason for killing the family but doesn't really want to kill you, just disable you for a while, put you out of action? He could have staged the events this morning—thereby putting you in bed, and also making himself look the hero. It would be a good deed to point to later, if he should end up being the last surviving member of the family, with all that money waiting in the bank."

Good point.

"Good point," St. Cyr said.

"And too, the killer might be an outsider with a gun of his own."

St. Cyr nodded. "Can you trace this TDX-4, find where it's been purchased lately in the area?"

"Impossible. As I said, it's a legal hallucinogen on Darma. It's sold everywhere that chewing gum is sold." Still on the edge of the chair, he combed his hair with his fingers and said, "What exactly did you see in the garden? What got after you?"

"The trees, the brambles, the grass."

"But those were illusions."

"Yes."

"What ripped your shoulder?"

St. Cyr unconsciously reached for the bandaged arm. "A wolf."

"You saw it?"

"Sort of." St. Cyr tried to explain the chaos in the garden, the way things had looked to him when he was under the influence of the hallucinogen.

Rainy interrupted him. "You don't have to go into much detail. I've used TDX-4 many times, though never with a paranoid reaction."

"I've been feeling paranoid lately." St. Cyr shifted, sat up higher in bed. "Anyway, I saw a wolf, a silver wolf."

"Gray," Rainy said.

"No, silver. Bright shiny silver, in parts."

"That could be part of the illusions."

"Perhaps. But I remember that I also seem to remember that it was always snarling, its mouth opened wide, lots of teeth showing... Funny that it never attempted to bite. It just swatted at me with those godawful claws..."

"A trained animal?" Rainy asked.

"I thought of that. In fact, I thought it might belong to Hirschel. If a trained animal *is* involved, its master has to be a member of the household—to let it in when it killed Leon and Betty."

Rainy sank back in the chair. "We keep getting more and more file pages on this affair, but nothing makes sense when you try to put it together."

St. Cyr squirmed uneasily and turned sideways on the bed, more directly

facing the policeman. "I have this bothersome notion that everything I need to know is right before me. I've been hunting the needle in a mound of hay, have gotten down to the last piece of straw, have picked that up and found nothing. All the while, the needle is lying flat on the ground under my knee. If I could just move, see it at a different angle than I've been viewing it from so far, it would all be very obvious."

Rainy pointed at the cyberdetective's chest. "Isn't your machine helping any?"

St. Cyr frowned. "Not much yet. That also bothers me. If it *feels* this close, the bio-computer ought to have more of it worked out than it does."

To feel is an emotional response. I operate logically.

Rainy said, "Well, everyone in the family was by himself at that hour. No one has an alibi. For all we know, it could have been all of them working in harmony against you."

"Been taking TDX lately?"

Rainy smiled. It was the first time St. Cyr had witnessed any genuine humor in the man. Rainy said, "And what in hell do you want me to do with the bloodhounds?"

St. Cyr sat up straight, "They've arrived?"

"Yes," Rainy said. "What a hideous name for such gentle-looking creatures. What are they for?"

"A little-known, seldom-used method of tracking fugitives," St. Cyr told him. "They became *passi* when limited-response mechanicals became the big rage in police work."

"You're going to put them onto the wolf?"

"I hope so. I sent for them three days ago, when Dane and I came back from visiting the gypsies. They're from off-planet, though out of this same solar system. Great expense getting them here, but it's Jubal's money being spent." He pushed himself to the edge of the bed and got to his feet. A dull flutter of pain flowed down his left side, most of it masked by whatever narcotics the autodoc had given him.

"Here, now!" Rainy said, standing, reaching to give him a steadying hand. "As I understand it, you're confined to the bed."

"Not with the hounds here and some daylight left," St. Cyr said.

"You're in no condition to—"

"Look, Otto, you know as well as I how an autodoc can knit you up. I've got bulky speedheal bandages on here. In two days I'll have nothing to show for this but a white scar."

Reluctantly, Rainy agreed.

"Good. Now I want to find the shirt I was wearing this morning when I was attacked. It'll have my scent, chiefly. But good dogs ought to be able to ferret out the wolf's spoor and ignore mine."

"I'll ask Tina where it is," Rainy said.

St. Cyr said, "Be in the garden, where it happened, in fifteen minutes."

"Right."

St. Cyr dressed slowly, favoring his damaged shoulder.

"Track him by *smell*?" one of the policemen with Inspector Rainy asked, incredulous. He looked disdainfully down at the sloppy-lipped hound that was snuffling at his shoes.

"They successfully tracked more fugitives, over the last few thousand years, than any of your damned machines," the dogs' trainer said. He was a short, wiry, blue-eyed albino named Horace Teeley, and he clearly would not tolerate anyone maligning his charges. The expression he gave the young copper was enough to wilt the grass under them.

The first couple of times St. Cyr had located and leased hounds, he had expected their trainers to arrive in overalls, work shirts, mudboots and straw hats, just as they usually appeared in ancient fiction and old picture books. But they were all depressingly modern. The fees they made from occasionally renting their animals were sufficient to keep them in a kind of style. Either that or they were independently wealthy and raised bloodhounds for the sport of it more than anything. No one spent hours training a hound to track, these days; it was simply a way to pass the time or a good protection against burglary. Horace Teeley was dressed in an expensive blue suit, flamboyant lace shirt and a white string tie. As pale as he was, he looked more like a deepsea creature imitating a man, or an escapee from a costume party, than like a trainer.

"This shirt," St. Cyr said, hunkering beside Teeley, "is mine. It's full of my scent. But I was wearing it when I was clawed. There'll be a trace of the wolf on it—if the dogs can delineate that closely."

"Nothing better?" Teeley asked.

"The police still have the clothes that the other three victims were murdered in. Someone could be sent back to headquarters in the copter and have them here in forty minutes or so."

Teeley shook his head. "No. Too much time will have passed for those old clothes to be of any use; scent will have faded. We'll make a go of it with this."

St. Cyr stepped back beside Inspector Rainy and let the trainer alone with his animals. St. Cyr looked at the sky, decided they had a little less than two and a half hours of daylight left. With a little luck, that would be enough.

Besides himself and Inspector Rainy, there were three more cops in the garden. Dane was there too, heedless of the warnings Inspector Rainy had given him. The rest of the family remained in the house. He wondered if Tina were painting at the moment...

"Looks like he's talking English to them," the young copper said.

Teeley was hugging both of the big, sad-eyed dogs to him, whispering to them, scratching them, occasionally stuffing the shirt under their noses, only to pull it away and, in words none of the others could hear, caution them about the double scent the shirt bore. At last, he stood up. "I think they've got

it now."

Both dogs were whining, snorting, slobbering close to the ground, turning their heads this way and that.

Rainy said, "Why not start them in the part of the garden where it happened?"

"That's nearby," St. Cyr said. "And depending on how they lead us to the spot, we'll know which scent they're onto—mine or the wolf's."

"Let's go," Rainy said.

Teeley gave the dogs their leash and waited.

The thoroughbreds snuffled like two straining steam engines and began to run toward the nearest hedgerow. They bent their heads to it, whined slightly, followed it quickly along to the middle and tried to force their way through it at that point. Realizing finally that this was not how it was done, they wanted to leap over. Afraid they'd hamstring themselves, Teeley calmly walked them to the beginning of the hedge, around it, and down the other side to the spot they felt the wolf had leapt across. They picked the scent up again at once, and they were off, moving fast enough to make it clear they were onto something, but not fast enough to build up any premature hopes in those who tagged after them.

When they entered the tree-shrouded walkway in which St. Cyr had been attacked, the cyberdetective said, "They've got the wolf, not me. I entered it from the other end and never got this far!"

"I'll be damned!" the young copper said. He loped ahead to be closer to the hounds.

Shortly, they were at the place where the wolf had brought St. Cyr down, running in tight circles, crying mournfully.

"This way, I think," Teeley said.

The hounds took off again, nearly dragging him to the ground.

"Looks like we have something," Rainy said.

St. Cyr didn't feel like committing himself yet. A moment later, he was glad he hadn't. The hounds stopped dead, having lost the trail.

"What is it?" Rainy asked.

"Give them time!" Teeley shouted.

St. Cyr explained to the Inspector that the hounds had unaccountably lost the trail.

"They'll find it! They'll get it again!" Teeley said.

Half an hour later it was quite evident that the trail was lost for good. The hounds had given up on it and were spending more time sniffing at each other than at the ground. When one of them, the one Teeley called Blue, stuck his big blunt nose in a large yellow flower to suck down a little perfume he fancied, St. Cyr thought the trainer was going to have a fit and strike the dog dead with his bare hands.

"Never failed like this before," Teeley said. "Never so soon."

"Any notion why?" Rainy asked.

"They were at it great," the trainer said. "Then they get to that spot there and they're stymied, just like the damn wolf vanished there."

"Perhaps it did," Dane said.

The trainer looked at him. "Serious?"

Dane said he was. He looked at St. Cyr. "If it was not just an ordinary wolf but a *du-aga-klava*, it could have changed from wolf to man at that spot and walked calmly away."

"The scent would remain the same," St. Cyr said patiently.

"For wolf-form and man-form? I doubt it."

"Anyway," St. Cyr said, "if this is a *du-aga-klava*, it has a human accomplice who fired the darts at me."

Dane had an answer for that too. "It could have used its dart pistol while it was a man, then changed into the wolf for the attack."

"You're getting farther and farther out in your theorization," St. Cyr said. He smiled grimly as he looked at the sky. "Besides, it's daylight, just as it was when Dorothea was killed. Your werewolf is supposed to loathe sunlight, at least when he's in his wolf-form."

Dane said, "Perhaps; perhaps not. In the old Earth legends that parallel the story of the *du-aga-klava*, sunlight meant nothing to the creature, though the full moon was the catalyst that brought about his transformation."

"Well, we have eight moons here," St. Cyr said. "At least two of them are always up and full. I guess it's a werewolf's paradise."

Teeley said, "My dogs are getting cold. There's a night chill coming on."

"Let's go back, then," St. Cyr said.

On the way to the house, he could not shake the feeling that something important *had* been discovered through the use of the hounds. If he could just think what, it would add to the already sufficient fund of data he had accumulated.

Very little data, actually. You're letting your emotions think for you again.

No. I'm sure the answer is obvious and close at hand.

Illogical.

But I *feel* it

Immaterial.

TEN: *Another Corpse*

An hour after the police had gone, shortly before nightfall, the house computer summoned St. Cyr to the telephone, where a call awaited him from the port offices of Worldwide Communications.

"St. Cyr speaking."

The woman on the other end of the line was genuine, not a tapedeck recreation. She said, "We have a confidential light-telegram for you, Mr. St. Cyr."

"From whom?"

"Talmud Associates of Ionus." That would be the data that Talmud had gathered on Walter Dannery, the man whom Jubal's accountants had fired for embezzling funds.

"Stat it, please."

"It's labeled confidential," the woman said. "We have no authorization to stat the contents."

"Do you have a delivery service that could get the thing to me?"

"Tonight?"

"If possible."

"Not until morning," she said. "If you want it tonight, you'll have to come in to the office. You must sign for it."

"Never mind," he said. "Have it delivered first thing in the morning."

"Certainly, Mr. St. Cyr." She broke the connection.

Five minutes later, he announced himself at Tina Alderban's studio door, waited a full minute and then repeated his name. He knew that she was in the suite, for if she had not been, he would have been informed of that fact by the house computer, which could keep track of comings and goings. A moment later the concealed panel slid up, coded by her voice. He stepped through the entranceway and walked into the huge room, where she was working on a new canvas. The overhead lights were on, since only a haze of sunlight entered the room through the windows. Outside, it was almost dark.

"Am I disturbing you?"

Without looking up, she said, "Yes. But come in and sit down."

He did as she said, choosing a chair from which he could see the back of the easel and the front of her perfect, dark face.

She said, "Shouldn't you be out—detecting?"

"I am."

"You don't appear to be. Unless I'm a suspect."

"Everyone's a suspect."

For the first time since he had come in she looked at him, then quickly back to her canvas and worked a brush full of blue paint into the square

surface. She said, "And why do I qualify?"

"Let's not talk about you just now," he said. "Tell me about Dane."

"Tell you *what* about him?"

"He seems quite superstitious."

She nodded, put down the blue brush, picked up a yellow.

"Doesn't that strike you as odd?" St. Cyr asked.

"Why should it?"

"Everyone in the family has had intense sleep-teach education, and all of you appear to have higher than average IQs."

"So?" She swirled the green.

"Generally speaking, an educated man is not superstitious. He scoffs at ghosts, gods, curses and spells—and werewolves."

"Blame the hypno-keying," she said, leaning closer to the painting. She was wearing a smock that came midway down her thighs. He wondered if she were wearing anything else under it.

"Why blame that?"

"I told you," she said, plopping the green brush into a jar of oil, picking up the blue again, "that hypno-keying can do strange things to you. It amplifies your imagination in certain areas. In Dane's case, it has greatly increased his sense of language and ability to deal with prose—but it has also tapped a well of imagination that probably runs deeper in him than in any of the rest of us. Read his books?"

"No."

"Some of them border on the mystical."

"I thought they were historicals."

"They are. But they still have qualities of mysticism in them. It's not at all odd that he should get hung up on this particular local legend, especially since he has been working on a novel that deals with the history of the Darmanian race."

"He never told me about that."

She made a bold stroke of blue, then edged it with more care. "He's secretive about his work."

"Did he ever mention a man named Salardi?"

"The archaeologist? Oh, he's spent a hundred hours interviewing him, gathering background for the novel." She was perched upon a high stool. She crossed her slim, brown legs, suddenly seemed to realize that she only made herself more attractive that way, uncrossed them and hunched closer to the canvas.

"We saw Salardi the other day, when we were up at the gypsy camp. Dane never mentioned that he had spent that much time with the man."

"Did you ask him?"

"No, but—"

She put down her brush and interrupted him. "Do you think Dane's the

killer?"

"I suspect everyone."

"I guess that's the *logical* way to handle the situation." She was clearly scornful of him, and especially of the other half of his symbiote.

He got out of the shape-changing chair and walked to her stool, stood beside her. "Logic hasn't failed me yet."

"What logic is there in Dane's being the killer?"

"He could be psychopathic." He stepped behind her and, without her permission, put his hands on her shoulders. They both stared forward at the painting in progress, as if it were a mirror in which they could see each other. "But let's not talk about Dane anymore."

"What shall we talk about?"

"You."

"I'm not interesting."

"To me you are."

She turned around on the stool and faced him, raised a hand and pushed the long black hair away from her face. She said, "Take off that goddamned shell and go to bed with me." Her face was slightly lined about the mouth, though that was the only indication that she felt under any sort of strain. She was absolutely beautiful.

"Now?" he asked.

He did not know why he felt threatened by her proposal, especially since it was one that he had wanted to make to her for some days now, but he found it almost impossible to respond beyond the single adverb.

"Now," she said.

He hesitated, looked at the windows.

He said, "It's dark."

She said nothing.

He was sure that she was naked beneath the smock; and he was also certain that she had expected him tonight.

He said, "I've been here so long—to have accomplished so little. I've got to keep the symbiosis active; I have to come up with something soon."

She said, "Of course."

"No, look, Tina, I—"

The house computer interrupted him. "Mr. St. Cyr, you are wanted in the entrance foyer on the second floor. Urgent. Mr. St. Cyr, you are wanted—"

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know."

He bent and kissed her, felt her lips open beneath his as she responded emotionally despite her apparent resolve to shut him out unless he came around to her way of thinking. Then he turned and walked swiftly from the room.

When St. Cyr entered the short, paneled hallway that led to the circular

foyer—not at all regretful that the house computer had interrupted the scene with Tina—he saw that Jubal, Dane and Teddy had gotten there ahead of him. He felt, suddenly, that the answer to the whole affair was again close to him, almost within his grasp... Also, he had a nagging feeling that he should have driven into the port to pick up the data on Walter Dannery, even if the man were the least suspect of suspects. Nothing should be overlooked. He thought of Tina, alone in her studio, and now he *did* regret leaving her there. More than he had wanted anything in years, he wanted to remove her smock and take her to bed, possess her and let her possess him. What had stopped him?

"What happened?" he asked Dane, who was nearest the entrance to the foyer.

When he stepped past the boy, he saw exactly what was the matter: Salardi lay dead in the center of the foyer floor.

ELEVEN: *A Clever Enemy*

St. Cyr bent over the corpse and examined it, then looked up at the others and said, "His neck's been broken. Unless I'm less observant than I think, it was done with a single blow. There's only one bruise, anyway." He looked back at the corpse and said, "How long has he been lying here?"

Jubal said, "I don't know."

Teddy said, "He must have entered with someone who had a key to the door, because the house computer does not have any record of his calling."

"Perhaps he had a key of his own," St. Cyr said. The corpse was lying face-down, and he turned it over so that he could feel inside of Salardi's pants pockets. "No key," he said.

"What would he be doing here?" Jubal asked.

"Perhaps he came to tell us something," Dane said. "Something that the killer didn't want us to know." He looked at St. Cyr, blinked, said, "Or does that sound too melodramatic?"

"Life is one big melodrama," St. Cyr said. "He might very well have had something I could use." He stood up and wiped his hands on his slacks as if he were dusting off the taint of death, although he knew it was not that easy to be rid of. "I understand he was a friend of yours, Dane."

Surprisingly, the boy did not attempt to deny it, "I spent days with him, recording interviews that would give me background on the Darmanian culture prior to man's settlement here."

St. Cyr said, "He could have come here with you."

Dane shook his head violently. "That's silly." He gestured to the body and said, "I liked Salardi, admired him. I never would have killed the man."

St. Cyr said, "The corpse is still very warm. Can you prove where you've been during the last hour?"

"In my room," Dane said. "Then I came down to the kitchen for a snack. I was there when the house computer asked for you. I thought that something unusual must be happening, and I was close enough to get here before you did."

Still a possibility.

Obviously.

"And you?" St. Cyr asked Jubal.

"I was in the kitchen too. Before that, I was working in the library, researching ancient Grecian patterns for a—"

"Can you prove it?"

"I was alone," Jubal said. He took a step toward St. Cyr, accidentally kicked the corpse in the shoulder, stepped back in horror. He said, "Look here, you don't still think it's one of the family responsible for all of this, do you?"

"If I do, do you want me to drop the case? I could pack up and get out

tonight."

"No," Jubal said. "You've got to stay, especially after this."

"Then, yes, I still believe it has to be the family, one of you. Salardi was the only man outside of the family that was a possibility. He's dead and no longer in the running."

Jubal was clearly displeased, but he did not say anything more.

St. Cyr turned to Teddy and said, "Did you find him?"

"Yes, sir. I immediately notified the house computer through that robotic-link terminal in the wall, made a special request that you be summoned."

"You didn't touch anything?"

"I am aware of the dangers of obliterating evidence," the master unit said, as if St. Cyr had insulted it.

The cyberdetective looked at the two men and said, "Did either of you disturb anything in the foyer—after you came across Salardi?"

"We got here together," Jubal explained. "We checked the body to be certain he was beyond medical aid, but otherwise we were very circumspect."

"Teddy, I'd like you to go telephone the authorities; ask for Inspector Rainy, and tell him to get his ass out here on the double, along with two men to take up permanent residence if that is required."

"Yes, sir."

The master unit turned and floated quickly down the hall toward the nearest telephone. They stood silently in the foyer, waiting for it to return, not looking at each other, trying not to think about what had happened and what was going to happen when the police arrived. A few minutes later, Teddy returned. He said, "I'm sorry, Mr. St. Cyr, but the telephone does not seem to be working. I could not get a dial tone, and I had the house computer check out the mechanism, with negative results."

Without responding, St. Cyr, followed by the others, walked to the junction of the corridors, where a telephone rested on an ornate gold and white stand; he picked it up and listened to the silence for a long time, then hung up. He said, "Are all the phones in the house on this one line?"

"Yes," Teddy said.

"Isn't that odd?"

"No, sir. The house computer has a functional node that operates as a switchboard for all the extensions."

"You mean the phone is out of order?" Jubal asked. He looked as though he was ready to take on the president of the communications company. "That's unheard of!"

St. Cyr looked at the telephone and, as patiently as he could, explained: "Not out of order, Mr. Alderban. Someone has cut the lines."

No one had to be told what that meant.

St. Cyr turned to Teddy and said, "Is there a vehicle of any sort in the garage that could transport the entire family out of here?"

"We have a small bus, for excursions," Teddy said. "It is more than adequate." He was calm, rational, even-voiced. St. Cyr wished that he had to deal solely with machines; he could already see how the family was going to react to the news that they would cut and run.

"We'll leave in the bus," the cyberdetective said.

"Leave?" Jubal asked. But he was not disagreeing particularly; he was beyond that, but he was perplexed.

"We can only assume that the killer has cut off our ties with the outside world in order to make his final moves without fear of police intervention."

"Tonight?" Dane asked.

"It looks that way."

"But if we run—" Jubal began.

"At least we'll be alive tomorrow," St. Cyr finished. "Let's go get Tina and Alicia."

"And Hirschel," Jubal said.

"Yes, and Hirschel."

"Wait a minute," Dane said. His voice was high-pitched, excited, as it had been when they were with Norya. "If we split up, we could get everyone together much faster. I'll go tell Tina what's happening. Father, you go see that mother knows—"

"Forget that," St. Cyr said.

"What?"

"We stay together from now on. It'll take us longer to get ready, but we'll all be safer in the end."

Dane said, "Are you afraid that one of us might be attacked?" His voice contained no sarcasm, just an edge of fear.

"Or that one of you might attack someone else," St. Cyr said. The fear he thought he heard in Dane Alderban's voice could as easily have been faked. "I don't trust anyone in this household. The sooner each of you gets that through his head—and the sooner all of you become as cynical as I am—the less chance there is that the killer can get away with a fifth murder."

He turned and walked down the main corridor toward the elevator, conscious that they were behind him. He fought an urge to whirl about and see what they were doing, what expressions marked their faces. As long as two or more were at his back, he was safe. He just had to remember never to turn his back on a man alone—or a woman alone, for that matter.

Fifteen minutes later, Teddy led the way across the garage floor to the ten-seat bus that was parked in the last stall. The family trailed after him, more willing to evacuate the mansion than St. Cyr had imagined they would be. Only Tina had questioned the wisdom of packing them all in one bus when the killer might be one of their number, and only Tina had not been completely satisfied with his arguments for this course of action. She had said, "Bullshit."

At the bus, St. Cyr stopped them with one word and, remaining slightly separated from them, his own pistol in the chamois shoulder holster under his bandaged arm, said, "Do those of you issued the narcotic-dart pistols still have them?"

Dane, Tina and Jubal said that they did.

St. Cyr turned to Hirschel and said, "What have you got?"

The hunter took a nasty-looking projectile pistol from a holster under his jacket. The weapon had a short snout, a thick trunk where a large number of rounds were stored, a butt sculpted to fit Hirschel's hand. "It'll stop a boar, and it'll make confetti of a man."

The statement seemed to make Alicia Alderban ill, though the others did not evidence any reluctance to witness such a thing.

"Anything else?" St. Cyr asked him.

Hirschel smiled slightly and pulled a knife from his waistband. "It's good for close work, hand-to-hand combat. But it's also balanced well enough for throwing."

"Fine," St. Cyr said. "You all came prepared. Now if you'll just hand over the narcotic-dart guns, the projectile pistol and the knife, we can leave."

Jubal's face flushed, and he stepped toward St. Cyr with his blocky fists bunched at his sides again, the same pose he had assumed the first time the cyberdetective had implied that the murderer might be a member of his family. "What in the hell is this, Sc Cyr? Do you want to leave all of us defenseless? You've already told us that—"

"Jubal," St. Cyr said, cutting him short, "I think you're one of the most short-sighted sonsofbitches I've ever met."

The old man stopped and stared at the detective as if St. Cyr were some new, alien species. He was clearly not accustomed to being spoken to like that, without deference and respect. He had just walked into a brick wall.

"I think you've had money too long," St. Cyr went on. "You've always had life easy, never had to really compete, and now a few important parts of your brain seem to have atrophied."

It felt good, awfully good.

Emotional indulgence.

Until this moment, the cyberdetective had not realized fully how much the household had weighted him down, how depressed he was by the emotional barrenness of this old man. He looked at Tina and realized that her death would be taken as lightly as the others, absorbed by the family—a few tears shed, a few minutes of loss, and then back to the canvas or the typewriter or the guitar, back to the art. Somehow, that was more evil than the killer, more despicable than bloody murder.

St. Cyr said, "I told you the killer was here, among us. I haven't the faintest notion, yet, who he is. But I'm not taking any chances that he'll be on that bus, jammed in with the rest of us, with a weapon in his hand. I feel as if I'm on the verge of figuring out this whole damned thing, that it could break any time now. But until it does, until I can positively nail someone with it, we're taking

every possible precaution. Now, please, hand over your weapons."

They complied with his demand.

The old man handed his gun over last, reluctantly. He watched as St. Cyr located a large piece of buffing cloth in the car-washing supplies cabinet and bundled the artillery together. He said, "I hope you'll remember that I'm still your employer, Mr. St. Cyr. I hired you; I pay you; and I can let you go."

"Bullshit," St. Cyr said.

"Fantastic!" Tina chimed in, grinning. "You're actually getting emotional; you actually sound like a human being; Baker."

"Scared," he said. "That's all."

"That's human enough," she said.

He smiled, nodded and said, "Let's get aboard. The sooner we're among other people, the better I'll feel."

The others trooped in ahead of him, providing him an opportunity to massage his bandaged shoulder, which had begun to throb painfully. He should have obtained a booster shot of pain-killer from the autodoc before they left, but he hadn't felt that there was time for that.

Teddy was the last in the bus; he swung into his niche beside the seat designed for a human driver. By-passing the wheel, he plucked several control leads from beneath the dash and plugged them into his gleaming body trunk.

St. Cyr sat in the last seat in the bus, a position from which he could observe everyone else. He touched his shoulder, pressed down on the bandages and realized that was no good. He was just going to have to be stoical about it.

Up front, Teddy's head swiveled on his body trunk and faced the rear of the bus, an unnecessary gesture, since the robot had no face except for the soft green sight receptors. He said, "Mr. St. Cyr, something has happened to the power cell."

"For the bus?"

"Yes. I am not even recording a trickle charge on the meter."

"Check it out"

The master unit detached itself from the control cables, opened the door and exited the bus. It opened a panel on St. Cyr's side of the vehicle, took one look in the small cavity that housed the compact drive system, closed the panel and came back into the bus. "The power cell is gone, Mr. St. Cyr."

"Gone?" He felt ponderously slow, as if he were reacting to the world at quarter speed, a man moving through syrup.

"Someone removed it."

Wearily, St. Cyr rose and herded them out of the bus again. No one objected, not even Jubal. Apparently some of his own fear had finally filtered down to them.

"We'll go in two groundcars," he told them. "Three of us in each, Teddy driving the first car. We keep the vehicles close together and keep an especially good eye on each other."

Perhaps the other power cells are also gone.

St. Cyr nodded to himself and directed Teddy to look into all the other vehicles. "All empty, Mr. St. Cyr," he reported as he floated back to them. "Someone's removed all the power cells."

St. Cyr looked at the others and smiled grimly. He was *feeling* grim; the smile was no stage piece. "One of you is certainly a clever bastard, always a step or two ahead of me."

"I'm frightened," Alicia said, moving closer to her husband. The old man put an arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. St. Cyr could not help but wonder if that same arm had applied the pressure that broke Salardi's neck...

"What now?" Hirschel asked. He was the only one in high spirits.

"We're two hours or more from help, by car, but we have no cars. The telephones are out. The only thing we can do, until morning, is stay in the same room and keep watch in shifts, never more than three of us asleep at one time."

"Which room?" Hirschel asked.

"The kitchen, I believe. It doesn't have any windows."

Still somewhat angry at St. Cyr's put-down, Jubal said, "No windows? What does that matter?"

"I'm sure the killer is one of us," St. Cyr said. "But I'm still not ruling out other possibilities. Besides looking out for each of you, I don't want to have to guard the windows."

"Very good," Hirschel said, nodding his approval of the tactic.

St. Cyr had drawn his own pistol and was pointing it in their general direction. "Let's go."

Jubal said, "Is the gun really necessary?"

St. Cyr looked hard at the old man and, this time, did not attempt to conceal the pain that worried his shoulder like sharp teeth. Evenly, he repeated: "Let's go."

This time no one questioned his authority. They went up to the second level, where—if they survived—they would spend the remainder of the night.

TWELVE: *A Murderer Revealed*

A cyberdetective rarely removes his bio-computer shell during an investigation, for he knows that many cases are solved by taking notice of the smallest developments. Often, some mundane action is the trigger that fires the memory and shoots down the veil of confusion shielding the true nature of events. In the case of the Alderban murders, for Baker St. Cyr, understanding was triggered by an ordinary back-scratcher...

When they reached the kitchen, St. Cyr dispatched Teddy to patrol the main corridor on the second level and to keep a special watch on the elevator light-boards in the event that someone had illegally entered the mansion. Next, he carefully marked off limits in the huge kitchen, making it clear that no one was to move out of the large, open center of the floor, and certainly not toward one of the many utilities drawers that might contain a knife or other weapon. This done, the others sitting either on the floor or in the few chairs that were in the room, he perched on the block table to the right of the open area, keeping all of them in sight.

They talked among themselves and occasionally asked him questions. What were they waiting for? He didn't know—perhaps for the killer to make a move of some sort or to give himself away through a bad case of nerves. Preferably, they were just waiting for morning. What would happen in the morning? The delivery boy from Worldwide Communications would copter in with St. Cyr's light-telegram. He would probably be riding a one-man machine, but he could send help when he returned to the port.

When they had been in the kitchen more than an hour, everyone was quiet, wrestling with his own fears and working out his own suspicions. By morning, St. Cyr thought, they would all be just as cynical as he was. Even Jubal would no longer find it impossible to accept the notion that the killer was one of them. Already he was looking oddly at Hirschel.

Tina, who had been sitting on the floor with her pretty legs tucked under her, rose and stretched, walked slowly toward St. Cyr. She stood to his side so that she would not interfere with his view of the family. She said, "How's the shoulder?"

"I'll live."

"You should have had another dose of morphine by now."

He used his good hand to scratch his back and said, "I'm getting used to the pain, but I'll soon be nuts if it doesn't stop itching."

"Want a back-scratcher?" she asked.

"You have one?"

"In that drawer over there," she said. "It's full of odds and ends."

"Knives?"

She did not smile. "No knives."

"Get it for me, would you?"

She crossed the room, opened the drawer and rummaged through it while

everyone else in the room watched her closely. She turned a moment later and came back with a stainless steel back-scratcher. It was formed like a human hand, with five blunt fingers.

"Turn around and I'll get it for you."

He smiled and took the tool out of her hand. "I'll do it myself."

"Of course," she said, "I forgot. I might try to beat you with it, knock you out or something like that."

"Something like that," he agreed.

She was angry, but she did not go away. She folded her arms under her full breasts, making them fuller, and leaned against the edge of the table. Even now, during this penultimate moment, he could not help but want her.

Re-direct your attention.

St. Cyr reached over his shoulder with the silvery tool and began clawing at his back below the bandages. He shivered as relief flooded over the affected area. And that abruptly, he knew who the killer was.

Impossible suspect.

He held the back-scratcher up before his face and looked at the tiny hand with the hooked fingers. He had no doubt at all that he was right, though it would be necessary to do a little breaking and entering to find the evidence he needed.

There will be no evidence. You suspect the wrong person.

No.

Let me feed you the data that cancels out your newest supposition. And, without his permission, it did just that, ran tapes that refuted the possibility of his suspicions in the minutest of detail.

Still, St. Cyr thought, hesitating now...

You are wrong.

He put the back-scratcher down. I guess I am, he thought.

He could not possibly be a killer.

For a few minutes the detective sat on the edge of the table, completely detached from everything except his new theory. The bio-computer had effectively disproved the possibility that he was still toying with, and yet...

Impossible.

Despite the wealth of data that the other half of the symbiote had fed him to the contrary, St. Cyr slowly became certain, once again, that he was right and the bio-computer was wrong. He was elated, felt light as air, energetic as he only was when he knew that he was on top of a solution.

To progress on feeling alone is illogical.

He stood and said, "I'm leaving the room for a few minutes."

"To go where?" Jubal asked.

"I want to look around a bit, collect a few pieces of evidence that I'm fairly sure I'm going to find." He looked at each of them, slowly, one-by-one, giving the bio-computer a chance to supply him with some suspect different than the

one that he was now so certain of. Jubal... Alicia, looking more frightened than anyone else... Dane staring with disbelief, still clinging to the batch of superstitions he thought was the only answer to the affair... Hirschel, watchful but not unsettled, almost smiling... Tina standing beside him, so innocent and attractive... But the bio-computer could not produce any viable alternative. St. Cyr told them: "I believe I know who killed the others."

Jubal was on his feet an instant later. "Good God, man, tell us who it was!"

"Not yet. I want to be sure of everything before I make any accusations. Give me twenty minutes or half an hour to look around."

"You don't mean that you're leaving us here alone, without any weapons?" Jubal asked, incredulous.

"That's best."

The old man was in a cantankerous mood again. Sitting there with nothing to do but brood for almost an hour, something he had probably never done before, he had put himself quite on edge. "I won't permit—"

"You haven't any choice," the cyberdetective said. He quickly crossed the room, opened the door, stepped into the corridor, and let the door shut behind him before anyone else could object—including the bio-computer, which had almost gotten to him once before.

"Mr. St. Cyr?" Teddy asked, looming suddenly out of the dark hall. His sight receptors glowed like cat's eyes. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," St. Cyr said. "In fact, I think I know which one of them did it."

Nothing could shock the master unit; he had no capacity for genuine surprise or outrage. He said, "Do you require any assistance in the apprehension, Mr. St. Cyr?"

"Thank you, Teddy, but not just yet. I have some prowling to do first, to be sure my suspicions are right."

"I'll help with that, if you want."

"You can help most by standing guard right here and making certain that none of them leave that room."

"I'll do that, sir." Efficient. Polite. Obedient. And just about as human as anyone in this strangely cool Alderban family.

"Excellent I'm going up to the fourth level, and I'll be back in about half an hour."

"Good luck, sir," the master unit said.

In the basement workshop some minutes later, Baker St. Cyr located a prybar in an open-front tool rack and used it to break into the cabinet in which Teddy kept the keys that he had shown Inspector Rainy and the cyberdetective only a few days before. The cabinet door was strong, and it screeched loudly as the lock tore loose and it grated open over the jagged ruin. St. Cyr hesitated when he had it open, listening for some sound that would indicate the break-in had been heard. He did not know if the house computer monitored things like

that. When two minutes had passed in agonizing silence, he decided that he was unobserved, and he began to read the tags on the keys, looking for those that he might be able to use.

He found them and placed them on the counter below the cabinet, then forced the violated door shut again.

This is all a useless endeavor.

He looked at his watch and saw that he had fifteen minutes of his half hour left. He did not want to keep them waiting beyond that time, for he did not want anyone to go onto the fourth level to look for him.

Five minutes later, he was done. He left the workshop carrying a paper sack full of interesting discoveries, crossed the garage, and stepped into the elevator shaft through the doors that he had forced open from the inside a short while ago. The shaft was lighted only by the glow that spilled through the open doors. The floor was only three feet below those lift doors on this last level, and he was able to use that minimal illumination to find the pair of parallel tracks on the righthand wall. It was on these that the lift rode; because the system was designed for horizontal as well as vertical movement, there were no cables to contend with. Standing on the thick lower rail, holding the sack in his left hand, he grasped the notched upper rail in his good right hand and began to laboriously work his way upwards.

Teddy was waiting outside the door to the kitchen, where St. Cyr had left him. "Nobody tried to leave?"

"No, Mr. St. Cyr." Teddy did not show any interest in the paper sack or its contents. "Do you want support in there, sir?"

"Not yet. If you'd continue to guard the door, I'd feel as if my back was well covered."

"Yes, sir."

St. Cyr vocal-coded the door and went inside, made certain it shut completely behind him, and walked to the table, where he put down the sackful of evidence.

Tina was sitting on the floor with the others again, her black hair fallen across her face like a mourning cloth. He supposed that if anyone here had it in him to mourn, it was Alicia. Still, the girl held that same mournful image in his mind. Dane also sat on the floor, Hirschel on a stool, Jubal and Alicia on matching white chairs. They almost looked, St. Cyr thought, like some medieval court—the king and queen above everyone else, the nobleman on the stool, the distant and unimportant cousins on the lowest level. They all watched him cross the room, put the sack down and seat himself on the table. Then, suddenly, as if realizing that he was not the one most to be feared, they looked furtively at one another, wondering... Only Tina made no attempt to read something sinister in the others' eyes; she stared at her hands, which were folded in her lap.

"The proof?" Jubal asked.

"Yes."

"Who?" He sounded very old, and not at all cantankerous. He sounded as

if he would rather not know who, would rather St. Cyr took the evidence away and never came back again.

"I'll come to that in a moment," the cyberdetective said. "First, I want to tell you who I've suspected over the last several days and my reasons for not trusting each. That way, when I come to whom I now *know* committed those four murders, you'll understand that I've not made a rash decision."

No one said anything.

Sr. Cyr said, "I first suspected Hirschel."

The hunter smiled. He looked like a wolf.

Succinctly, the detective explained the circumstances under which he had first seen their uncle: the storm, the rider on the horse, the bloody heads of the two boar. "I recognized quite early that Hirschel was the one individual in this household most capable of violence."

And still is.

Not quite.

St. Cyr continued: "Furthermore, he was basically an outsider who visited for a month or two every couple of years. Though the victims of the killer were his relatives, they were more distantly related to him than to any of you, perhaps distantly enough to be thought of as mere obstacles between Hirschel and the family fortune. He was also suspect because he was the sole living Alderban outside of this immediate family, heir to the entire industrial complex."

"Which I wouldn't want," Hirschel said. "I can't think of anything more boring than managing wealth."

"That's one of the reasons I finally rejected you," St. Cyr said. When the others stirred, aware that the number of suspects had just dropped twenty percent, the detective said, "Then I thought that it very well might be Dane."

"I tell you it's the wolf, the *du-aga-klava*."

"No," St. Cyr said. "But your superstition and your insistence on supernatural forces being involved were what first put you in a bad light. You're an educated young man, supposedly beyond such foolishness as that. Tina, however, has shown me how a hypno-keyed man might very well adopt such an unreasonable attitude despite the breadth of his education."

Jubal frowned and pulled on his nose as if he were not artistically satisfied with its proportions. "What on earth does hypno-keying have to do with all of this?"

"I won't go into that now," St. Cyr said. "Besides, Tina can give you a much better lecture on the topic than I can."

Jubal looked at his daughter, perplexed, but she did not raise her eyes to meet his.

Possibility: Hypno-keying has unsettled Dane Alderban's mind. His reliance on superstitions would seem to indicate this and might also evidence an underlying taint of more serious psychosis.

At most: neurosis.

St. Cyr ignored the other half of his symbiote and said, "For a long while, I suspected Jubal." The old man looked away from Tina, his face coloring. "From the beginning, Jubal insisted that I should look outside of the family for the killer, and he would not entertain for a moment any other likelihood. Each time that he attempted to redirect my attention away from a member of the family, I had to wonder about his intent. Now it seems clear that this was only naivete. Secondly, I was unfavorably impressed with Jubal's lack of emotional response to the deaths of his children. He seemed to view it all with a detached, almost *academic* sterility. Again, it was Tina who made me see how hypno-keying could be responsible for this unemotional reaction. And since Jubal has been a hypno-keyed artist a good deal longer than anyone else in the family, he has had more time to grow even cooler and more impersonal than his children are rapidly becoming."

"What the hell *is* this?" the old man asked. This time, St. Cyr noticed that Jubal's rage even appeared to be acquired rather than genuine, as if he were imitating an actor he admired. St. Cyr could not be angry with him now. He could only pity him.

"Finally," St. Cyr said, not answering the question, "Jubal seemed suspect because of his reluctance to allow the family to be armed with deadly weapons. It appears now that this was only due to some genuine dislike for weaponry."

"Of course it was," Jubal said. "And what motive would I have had for killing my own family?"

"The same motive Dane had—no motive at all. You could have been mentally unbalanced." He turned immediately to Alicia and said, "Then I suspected you. For one thing, you were the only one in the family who wept at Betty's death. That made you suspect simply because it was a different sort of reaction. When Tina explained that you had undergone hypno-keying much later in life than the others in the family, when you married Jubal, I felt that you were even more of a candidate for prison. What must it have been like, all these years, being at least somewhat emotional and caring in a house of people growing constantly more machinelike, colder, more selfish."

"It hasn't been easy," she said.

Jubal looked stunned. St. Cyr thought he really was, for once, what he appeared to be.

"But," the woman said, "I've had the guitar, my music, for comfort."

"You've left me," Tina said, after a long moment of silence.

St. Cyr sensed the ripple of surprise that passed through the others, heard Hirschel's quickly drawn breath of disbelief, waited for all of that to subside. He said, "You came on the list of possibilities when I learned that you were the only one in the family who fully understood what hypno-keying had done to you *and* the only one in the family who seemed to be angry that your life had been perverted, against your will, before you were old enough to understand what was happening. It seemed distinctly possible that you might have become unbalanced by having to live with this realization for years, and

that you might have felt that murdering your brothers and sisters, one-by-one, was the most fitting revenge on your father. Then again, you're a bright girl, too intelligent not to realize that Jubal's life has been tainted by hypno-keying, too, and that when he had each of you treated, he could not be said to be a rational man making a rational choice."

"But you still suspected me." She was still looking at her hands.

"Yes. You lived separate from the others. At a glance, that seemed to be because of the space limitations on other floors. However, it was soon clear to me that, with your family's resources, you could have adapted any part of the house to make a fine studio. You *wanted* to be separate from them. Perhaps because you hated them."

"Felt sorry for them," she corrected. "I didn't want to have to see them."

"Finally," the cyberdetective said, "I was wary of the relationship that seemed to be growing between us—at the same time that I encouraged it. Had I become sexually involved with you, or had I allowed my fondness for you to become something deeper than mere *liking*, my judgment in your sphere would have been severely affected."

"Very logical," she said. Her voice was bitter, not at all pleasant. St. Cyr thought that there might even be tears in it.

"I have to be."

"It's your job."

"Yes."

She looked at him for the first time now, and she did have tears in the corners of her eyes. She said, "Anything else I did that was suspicious?"

Yes, he thought, you always seemed, somehow, to be an extension of my nightmare, an analogue of the stalker...

Illogical.

He knew it was illogical even without the bio-computer's judgment. "No other reasons," he said.

Jubal roused himself. "But why do you hate your hypno-keyed talents, Tina? I don't understand. How can you hate me enough to murder your own brothers and sisters?"

"She didn't," St. Cyr said.

Jubal said, "*What?*"

"She didn't murder them."

They all looked at him again, surprised more than before. He saw that Tina was shocked too, and he realized that she had expected him to prove logically that she was the killer even though she was not. That made him feel tired and ill.

"Then what has been the purpose of all of this?" Hirschel asked.

"As I said when I started, I wanted you to see that I have been very careful to consider every angle before making an outright accusation. I want you to understand that I haven't been rash."

You are being rash now, and you know it.

I have proof.

You seem to. But what you are about to suggest is impossible.

"Who is it, then?" Hirschel asked

St. Cyr got a grip on the table and said, evenly, though the bio-computer still tried to reason him out of vocalizing the absurdity, "Teddy, the master unit, killed all four of them."

THIRTEEN: *Proof*

"But that's impossible!" Dane was the first to realize that they were no longer restricted to the open floor and that the cyberdetective would no longer be suspicious of any movement in his direction. He got to his feet and approached the detective, shaking his finger like a schoolmaster from the old days making a point with a misbehaving child. "You're grasping at straws to keep from admitting the truth, what we all know is the truth, that the *du-aga-klava*—"

"I have proof," St. Cyr said.

Hirschel was on his feet now, obviously intrigued by the prospect of a murderous robot but reluctant to believe it. "What about the Three Laws of Robotics? They've never been proven wrong before. Robots didn't turn against man as everyone once feared they might. Those three directives keep it from happening."

"There is a simple flaw in all those laws," St. Cyr said. "They leave out the human equation."

"Look," Hirschel said, approaching the detective and pointing at his own palm as if all of this were written there. "The First Law of Robotics: 'A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.' "

"Unless," St. Cyr amended, "he has been programmed especially to circumvent that directive."

"Programmed to kill?" Tina asked. She was standing next to him, her long black hair tucked behind her ears, out of mourning now.

"To kill," St. Cyr affirmed.

But Hirschel was not finished. He proceeded, almost as if he were reading a litany: 'The Second Law of Robotics—'A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings *except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.*' "

"But," St. Cyr pointed out, "if the First Law was already circumvented to a large degree, the robot would unfailingly obey an order to kill."

Convinced yet not convinced, Hirschel recited the Third Law: "A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law."

"Teddy will protect himself, despite the fact that it might mean killing to do it, because the First and Second Laws have no application in his case."

"But this is unheard of!" Hirschel said. Despite his insistence, it was evident that he had been convinced and that he looked upon the affair as one of those moments of excitement he traveled from world to world in search of. His dark eyes were bright.

"Perhaps it isn't as unheard of as we think. Perhaps the robot industries have encountered such misprogramming before but have always managed to

catch it before much damage was done, and to quiet the news media about it." He lifted the paper sack, then decided not to use that just yet. "For instance, I have a feeling that Salardi was on the run from private police hired by one of the major robot design and construction companies in the Inner Galaxy. I know he was a roboticist on the archaeological expedition, for he told me that much himself." He turned to Dane and said, "Did Salardi know about the killings down here?"

"You told him," Dane said. "Just the other day when you asked him those questions."

"That was the first he had heard of it?"

"It looked that way to me," Dane said. "He was a hermit of sorts. I hadn't talked to him in six months, since the last time I interviewed him to gather background for my book."

"Norya knew about the killings," St. Cyr said.

"But in confidence, as we planned how to make the authorities follow up on the *du-aga-klava* lead. Norya is exceedingly—professional. She would never gossip about such things to anyone."

"Then Salardi learned of the clueless murders when I told him about them the other day. He had a few days to think about them and—perhaps because he had once illegally mis-programmed a robot himself—realized that Teddy could be to blame. When he came to tell us, he made the mistake of addressing part or all of his business to the house computer that welcomed him. Teddy has a tie-in to the house computer and got to him before anyone knew he was here. Not having time to perform the sort of misleading slaughter he had on the other victims, he quickly broke Salardi's neck."

"You think Salardi once programmed a robot to kill?" Tina asked.

"Not necessarily. Perhaps to steal, or lie. I can imagine a hundred different situations where a thieving robot could be valuable. All I'm saying is that this sort of thing may be rare—but not unheard of."

"But why would Teddy be programmed to kill? Who would have been able to do it? And who would have reason?" Jubal asked.

St. Cyr said, "I'll get to that in a moment. First, though, I feel as if I ought to explain why I took so long reaching the conclusions that I have. I had all the facts for some time, but I just could not make them mesh."

"No need to explain, surely," Hirschel interjected. "No one would suspect a master unit robot of murder—not any more than anyone would suspect a man of giving himself a severe beating and then reporting it to the local authorities."

St. Cyr licked his lips and waited for the other half of his symbiote to respond subvocally. When it did not, he said, "It was worse than that for me, though. You know that my reasoning powers are augmented by the data banks and logic circuitry in the bio-computer shell that taps my nervous system. In those data banks are the iron-worded Laws of Robotics. Even when I began to wonder about Teddy, the bio-computer half of the symbiosis had such a strong effect on me that I almost willingly disregarded the prospect without following up on it as I should have. The bio-computer very nearly convinced

me that it was a silly supposition—impossible, an emotional reaction. But what the bio-computer could never come to terms with—since it is not human and has no conception of human fallibility— was the limited knowledge of those who had fed its data into it in the first place. Programmed knowledge, to any computer, is the word of God. All judgments are based on it. In this case, no one had informed the other half of my symbiote that there was a way around the Laws of Robotics."

"Okay," Jubal said. "I understand that, and I can't blame you for anything, certainly. But what about the proof you mentioned?"

"First of all," St. Cyr said, "the fact that the killer left no footprints in the damp garden soil can be explained by the fact that Teddy has a gravplate mobility system and never touches the ground. The lack of fingerprints is easily accounted for; stainless steel fingers are not whorled."

"But this is not conclusive," Hirschel said.

"Also, consider that he has access to the house, everywhere in the house. He can override the voice locks on all the bedroom doors, enter silently and at will. And, in those cases where the victims were murdered on their balconies, it is possible that he could increase the power input on the gravplate generators and drift up the side of the house to attack them without ever entering their rooms. He could get very close to anyone, for he was uniformly trusted."

Everyone but Tina and Hirschel seemed too stunned to take it all in. One trusted one's mechanical servants, for they were incapable of doing anything to make that trust hollow. If one could not trust robots, then all of modern society came in for suspicion. If robots could turn against men, all the underpinnings of this life might be as shaky as rotted planks. Hirschel was less affected because he was more the primitive than any of them. If the entire fabric of human existence, across the hundreds of settled worlds in the galaxy, fell apart tomorrow from some unimaginable cosmic event, he would survive with just his hands and a knife. Tina also, though a child of civilization, was not so affected by the disclosure as the others were—perhaps because she had ceased to care about a lot of things.

"How did he get the corpses to look as if they'd been clawed by an animal?" Hirschel asked. "His fingers are blunt, not sharp."

St. Cyr lifted the paper sack onto his lap, opened the top and lifted out a long tool that looked very much like a back-scratcher, with a long shaft terminating in four hideously sharpened tines that were curved at the tips like well-honed claws. "As you know, the 'hands' at the ends of Teddy's arms are only attachments which are removable so that he can accommodate the insertion of various other tools. The ends of his arms are something like drill clamps that will take any number of bits. This set of claws is one of those 'bits.'"

"Where in hell did he get that?" Jubal asked.

"He made it," St. Cyr said. "He's perfectly capable of operating a machine shop—just as you ordered him—a function he usually performs in order to transfer your silver designs from paper to reality. Somewhere along the line

he took the time to make himself this dandy little ripper."

"What I'd like to know is where *you* got that," Hirschel said.

"In Teddy's workshop."

"Just a while ago?"

"Yes."

"And he doesn't know what you went down there for?" Hirschel clearly felt St. Cyr had made a serious tactical error.

"He doesn't even know I went down there," St. Cyr said. "I told him I was going to the fourth floor. I sent the elevator up there, empty. Since there was no one else in the house to use it just then—you were all in the kitchen—I knew I had the elevator shaft to myself. I just used it to go down one floor to the garage, then into the workshop."

"With that arm?" Hirschel asked.

"The arm wasn't any problem going down," the cyberdetective said. "Coming up was a real bitch, though."

Hirschel smiled admiringly and said, "I believe that I have been underestimating you all along."

St. Cyr acknowledged the compliment with a nod, though it pleased him very much. On his left, Tina moved closer to him, until he felt their hips brush.

Hirschel said, "I expect that you can explain where he got that narcotic-dart gun that he used against you in the garden."

The detective reached into the paper sack, removed a pistol and handed it to the hunter. "Recognize the make?"

Hirschel gave it a careful scrutiny, pulled back the slide and peered at as much of the workings as he could see. "Very simplistic, but well-made. The mechanisms look too fragile to last long."

"Teddy machined it," St. Cyr said.

Jubal spoke up again: "But it was never stipulated that he know weaponry. I wouldn't want a master unit of mine to have that kind of knowledge."

"You never stipulated that he kill your sons and daughters, either," St. Cyr said.

Hirschel handed the gun back, and the detective put it with the artificial claws. To Hirschel, he said, "There is a wolf's head mounted in your suite. I saw it the first day I was here."

"I killed it a good many years ago," Hirschel said. "Before the species was eradicated by Climicon."

"Was that the only one you shot?"

"No. There were two others. But I didn't see any sense in having them mounted."

"What was done with them?" He already knew the general answer to that, but he wanted to get everything as exact as he could.

"I gutted, cured and tanned the hides, left the heads intact except for the

eyes. I knew the species was slated for eradication, and I knew that the hides would be worth a great deal of money some day, for museums and such. I have a lot of animal skins stored here on the second level. It's another eccentricity that Jubal allows me." He smiled at Jubal, and St. Cyr thought there was genuine affection on the older man's part for the younger.

The cyberdetective pulled the last item from the paper bag. It was one of the wolf hides that Hirschel had prepared and stored. "Teddy used it to plant wolf hairs with the bodies—and as a partial disguise when he attacked me in the gardens. He was wise enough to realize that if I were hallucinating, this minimal diversion would confuse me enough to keep me from recognizing him. He was also clever enough to disguise himself at all, on the chance that he might fail to kill me then—as he did."

"But," Jubal said, "what about the TDX-4, the drug he used on you? He could destroy all of this when he had finished with all of us—but the house computer would keep a record of the drug purchase. The police, if they were clever enough, could figure him out on the basis of that—and find out who illegally programmed him to kill."

"Except that Teddy didn't buy the hallucinogenic drug. It was already here, in the house."

"Where?" the patriarch asked. "No one in this house uses hallucinogens." He spoke with smug authority.

"I use them," Alicia said. She said so little, spoke so seldom, that when she did say anything her gentle voice cut like a knife.

"You?" her husband asked, uncomprehending.

No one else spoke.

Alicia said, "There are times—times when I simply can't stand it any more—when I need some escape."

"Can't stand what?" he asked.

Reluctantly, sadly, but beyond tears now, she said, "This house, my family, the coldness, the way we seldom speak to one another, the fact that we barely know each other..."

Jubal was speechless. This was a time of changes, large changes, or at least a time of intimations of changes, and he was going to have to make a great many adjustments, examine a long list of his cherished attitudes. None of it would be easy.

"Have you noticed that you're missing any TDX?" the cyberdetective asked the lonely woman.

"I haven't noticed."

"We'll look later," St. Cyr said. "But I'm certain that your supply has been reduced."

"Okay, okay," Jubal said, suddenly impatient, trying to wipe out his hurt and confusion with feigned anger. "The proof is conclusive. But who got to Teddy? Who re-programmed him with all these directives to kill?"

"May I try to answer that?" Hirschel asked. He was grinning, his hands swinging at his sides, like a high school kid meeting his first date.

"Go on," St. Cyr said.

"Teddy was never *re*-programmed," Hirschel said.

"Right," the detective said.

"The illegal directives were worked into his program in the factory," Hirschel said. "From the moment that he came here, he was prepared to kill everyone in the house."

"Once he had made the proper impression, generated trust, and got the necessary tools together," St. Cyr added.

Hirschel smiled and said, "And the man who programmed him was Walter Dannery."

"The man I fired?" Jubal asked.

"The same," Hirschel said. "Right?"

"I believe so," St. Cyr said.

"But that's insane!" Jubal said.

"I have no certain proof of it yet," the cyberdetective said. "But I probably will have in the morning—at least a bit of circumstantial evidence. Consider that Reiss Master Units are produced on Ionus, the same world to which Dannery went after he lost his job here. Also consider that he was one of your chief roboticists, as you've told me, and would very likely be a candidate for executive-level employment with Reiss."

Jubal looked as if he had been caught on the back of the head by a boomerang just after stating flatly that such toys didn't work.

St. Cyr got down from the table and began to put the evidence into the paper sack again. He said, "Did you have any proof—anything admissible in a court of law—that it was Walter Dannery who embezzled those funds?"

"He was in charge of that section and the only human authorized to handle the books. And computer tapes had been altered, rather crudely in fact. We couldn't flatly prove that it was Dannery—but we knew that it couldn't be anyone else." He sounded defensive, without reason.

"Therefore," the detective said, twisting the top on the bag, "no charge was leveled against him with Darmanian authorities."

"None," Jubal said.

"And without a mark on his work record, Reiss would have no reason to pass up his application for a job."

Jubal still could not accept the devious resurrection of the past. He said, "But the man embezzled the money. He knows he did. Knowing he was guilty, wouldn't he be relieved at getting off so lightly? When he'd had time to think it over, would he feed his hatred until he was willing to commit murder?"

"People have killed for less," St. Cyr said. "And it may just be possible that he was not lying to you when he told you that sob story about dependent children and a sick wife. If you'll excuse my saying so, you are not a proper judge of human emotions, not sensitive enough to such things to distinguish between a lie and the truth."

Jubal apparently was willing to accept the judgment. He said nothing more, but he looked at Alicia and took her hands and held her beside him, close.

"Question?" Tina asked.

"Yes?"

"How could Walter Dannery have known the circumstances of daily life in this house? He would have had to be familiar with so much to have so minutely programmed Teddy. For instance, he would have to know about the wolf skins in storage, about Dane's superstitions—"

"Not at all," St. Cyr interrupted. "All that Dannery needed to do was implant the prime directive: 'Kill everyone in the Alderban family, but protect yourself against discovery.' He would have needed a number of qualifying directives, of course: 'Choose an exotic means of murder; establish suspects outside of yourself; to all overt intents and purposes, perform according to the Three Laws of Robotics..." He may even have chosen the werewolf scheme, since he lived on Darma and may have known the legends. After that, however, it was up to Teddy to work out a viable plan for the extermination of the family. Remember that a master unit has a fantastic capacity for the storage of new data, while its logic circuits are four times as large and eight times better than those in the bio-computer that I wear. With the minimum of directives, Teddy could have worked out the rest of it."

"Now what do we do?" Alicia asked.

"We call Teddy in here and ask him to open his service panel for inspection. Unless I miss my guess, I believe he will obey. We simply shut him down."

"Like pulling a plug," Hirschel said.

St. Cyr crossed the room, opened the door and said, "Teddy?"

Teddy did not respond.

St. Cyr stepped into the hall. "Teddy, come here, please."

He received no answer.

"Where is he?" Hirschel asked.

"Gone," the cyberdetective said. "I seem to have guessed wrong. Apparently he was eavesdropping through the house computer."

FOURTEEN: *Confrontation with the Killer*

Hirschel maintained a small arsenal in his suite on the fifth level—pistols, rifles, revolvers, traps, and more insidious devices—and it was here that they armed themselves before making a thorough search of the mansion. Conventional weapons, for the most part, were useless against a robot, because the projectiles from few rifles—and from no handgun known—could be expected to pierce quarter-inch multi-pressed steel. In Hirschel's collection, however, were four vibra-beam weapons, guns that projected a powerful but rapidly dissipating beam of sound, carried and magnified in a high-intensity laser that moved on a line-of-sight between hunter and target. The light was visible as a quick flash, the sound beyond the range of the human ear. In close quarters, the weapon could kill a man and pretty well mangle the innards of a robot. Two of Hirschel's pieces were rifles, which he and St. Cyr chose, since they were more familiar with weaponry and would know how to use a rifle within the confines of a room, if the opportunity should come for that Tina and Dane took the pistols.

"We'll stay together," St. Cyr said. "Dane and I will walk abreast, Jubal and Alicia behind us, Hirschel and Tina at the rear. Keep your eyes open; we won't hear him coming if he doesn't want us to."

In the corridor, St. Cyr picked up the nearest phone link to the house computer and directed it to turn on and keep on every light in the mansion. Teddy had night vision. They didn't. He further ordered the house to shut down all but one elevator, which only they would be permitted to use. Without curiosity, the computer obeyed.

"Can a master unit override the orders I just gave the house?" the detective asked Jubal.

"No." Tired. Confused. Rich, yes, but what did that matter now?

"Perhaps, if he tampered with it—"

Jubal shook his head fiercely. "The house computer is a perpetual care unit that repairs itself. It's housed in the rock strata under the mansion, sealed up tight. There is absolutely no way that Teddy could have gotten to it."

"Good enough," St. Cyr said. He was beginning to feel as if it was all so much ritual from this point on, the obligatory chase before the inevitable ending. "We'll leave the bag of evidence in Hirschel's room. It contains Teddy's gun and claw, his two major weapons. That makes him less dangerous but not harmless, so watch your back while we're checking out the rest of these rooms." In fifteen minutes the fifth level was cleared. St. Cyr lifted the phone link to the house computer and said, "I want you to lock all the doors, patio doors and windows on the fifth level, inside and out I don't want you to unlock them except when you're told to do so by a human voice."

"Yes, sir."

He hung up and turned back to the others, grimaced and picked up the phone again.

"Yes?" the house asked.

"Can you distinguish between human voices and tapedeck constructions?"

The house said that it could.

He hung up again, "Let's go down a level," he said to the others.

The fourth level was clean, the lights burning brightly, the rooms still and deserted.

St. Cyr directed the house computer to lock all of the doors and windows as they left.

"Yes, sir," it said.

It sounded polite and obedient. He *knew* that no one could have gotten to it to make it behave otherwise. Yet... He supposed he would never fully trust another machine.

Illogical.

He was startled by the bio-computer's comment, chiefly because it was the first thing it had contributed since St. Cyr had begun to explain the nature of the crime to the family gathered in the kitchen.

They went down to the third level.

The library was clean.

So was Jubal's den, and Alicia's music room.

When they entered the main sitting room, where they had gathered to discuss the case on St. Cyr's first night in the mansion, Teddy drifted rapidly toward them, a dart gun affixed to the stump of his right arm. But that was impossible, St. Cyr thought. They had left the gun behind them, locked in Hirschel's room.

Teddy fired.

The dart stung St. Cyr's neck.

He plucked it out, though he knew it was too late. Evidently Teddy had been prepared for any contingency: He had manufactured two dart pistols.

Behind him, the others were hit too; they cried out and plucked the darts angrily from their chests and legs and arms, tossed them away. When he turned he saw that Teddy appeared to be a good marksman, for everyone was reacting as if he had been hit.

A second dart bit the detective's thigh. He pulled it loose, wondering: *poison this time?*

Hirschel went down on one knee, the rifle already up against his shoulder.

Why didn't I react that fast? St. Cyr wondered. He dropped into the familiar firing position to make up for lost time.

Hirschel pulled off a shot at point-blank range, worked it right into the center of the master unit's body trunk. As he fired, he let out a war whoop; obviously, even though he had been hit by a dart, he was happy to be embroiled in a fight.

Even in the brightly-lighted room, the intense laser pulse was noticeable, like a quick, ghostly flicker of life in another dimension—or like the slit-mouth smile of a native Darmanian impressed upon the air.

Dane fired too.

And Tina.

St. Cyr raised his rifle, sighted, felt the hallucinations hit him as his finger went around the trigger. A dozen Teddy master units appeared where only one had been a moment earlier. He did not think he should risk a shot now, for he could no longer be certain that there was no human between him and the robot.

Teddy reeled backwards under the impact of the vibra-beams, then turned and fled toward the window in the far wall.

"Dammit, he's getting away!" Hirschel shouted. He got up, stumbled towards the retreating machine, fell full length as he tripped over some imaginary obstacle.

Teddy smashed through the huge picture window, sent shards of glass flying in all directions, and disappeared into the darkness.

FIFTEEN: *A Desperate Barricade*

In the sitting room, while the others fumbled drunkenly with pieces of furniture to make a crude barricade at the smashed window, St. Cyr held onto the telephone link of the house computer, held on with both hands, and said, "Hello? Hello?"

The house did not reply.

"I want you to lock every door and window in the lower three levels right now," he commanded it.

The house did not acknowledge the order.

"You there?" he asked.

The house was not there.

He hung up, leaned against the wall, shoved away when he felt himself sinking into it, the plaster closing around him like butter, greasy and warm. Carefully placing one foot before the other, he plodded to the door, where Jubal was sprawled across the entrance. The old man stared stupidly at the ceiling and mumbled something that St. Cyr could not hear, did not want to hear, and ignored. He stepped over the drugged patriarch and was about to venture into the corridor when Alicia caught hold of his arm from behind.

"Where you going?" she asked. She was accustomed to the drug, and far less affected by it than they were.

"This house computer have a manual programming board?" St. Cyr asked.

She nodded. "But why don't you use the telephone link?"

"I tried that," he explained patiently, though he found it difficult to be patient with a woman whose face constantly changed shape: now squashed and ugly, now flat like paper, now drawn thin and humorous. He said, "Teddy got to the in-house lines as well, sometime just before he jumped us."

"And he had a second pistol," Alicia said, as if St. Cyr were to blame for not having located that weapon when he ransacked the cabinets and drawers in the workshop.

Maybe he *was* to blame.

He didn't want to think about that now. Indeed, he couldn't think about it, because he needed all his concentration to handle the single topic of the house computer.

To a thin-faced, squinty Alicia, he said: "I want to get the electric locks thrown on the bottom three levels, before Teddy has a chance to come back into the house through another door."

"He'll already have done that," she said.

To a round-faced, porcine Alicia, he said: "Maybe; maybe not. The hits the others made with vibra-beams may have stunned him. They may even have damaged or erased memory banks."

"I'll come with you," she said. "The keyboard is in the basement, behind

the workshop."

St. Cyr looked at the others, who were toiling mightily but accomplishing very little in the effort to block up the broken window. "You have to stay here, with them," he said. "Oversee the construction of the barricade. At least, then we'll have one secure room on this level."

She looked dubious.

"Don't look dubious," St. Cyr told her, patting her peaked head. "It isn't becoming to you."

"You'll never make it all the way down to the basement, to the board," she said, her mouth abruptly widening until it stretched from ear to ear.

"I'll make it," he said. "I've got the computer shell to help me weed out the real from the unreal."

"It didn't help you in the garden," she said.

"I wasn't prepared for this then." He stepped backwards, moving away from her huge mouth, prepared to strike her if she attempted to take a bite of him.

Hallucination.

Something crashed behind Alicia, and she whirled to see what had happened. In the instant, she gained two feet in height, a hundred pounds in weight, ballooned out and up like a bespelled giant recovering from sorcery that had midgetized it.

St. Cyr used the distraction to turn and stumble into the corridor, where the floor was rippling gently in a soft warm breeze.

When the elevator door opened for him, he saw that it was a wet, pink mouth waiting to swallow him, and he stepped backwards so fast that he fell.

Hallucination.

Of course, he thought. Hallucination. Still, it was difficult to step onto the wriggling tongue, turn and punch a button to make the thick lips close in front of him.

He was swallowed...

Then, with a jolt, he was regurgitated. He supposed it was because he contained too many sour memories to please the elevator's palate.

He swayed forward into the garage on the lowest level of the mansion, went painfully to his knees, felt the floor go soft and attempt to suck him down. The tile was halfway up his thighs when he finally levered himself loose and regained his feet.

A month later, he reached the far side of the garage and went through the archway into Teddy's workshop, half expecting to encounter the master unit again. The workshop, however, was deserted. He thought of getting down on his knees and giving thanks for that stroke of luck, then remembered that the floor would devour him if it were given an opportunity like that.

Hallucination.

Of course it was. He knew that. He did not believe in prayer, anyway. Most likely, he would have gotten down on his knees to pray while Teddy

entered the room behind him and broke his neck. If there were any gods, they were the sort who loved to play tricks like that. He knew from experience. Just as the stalker knew, too...

That thought sobered him, chiefly because he could not understand the sense behind it. What did that phantom figure from his nightmares have to do with any of this?

He looked behind his back.

Teddy was nowhere in sight.

He crossed the workshop to a white door labeled with red letters: HOUSE COMPUTER, MANUAL PROGRAMMING. The door was locked.

Well, of course it would be locked. He turned and braced himself against the work counter, walked until he reached the violated key cabinet, wrenched open the stubborn, twisted door and found the key to the programming room. Six months and several thousand weary miles later, he was back at the locked door, trying to fit the key to the slot. That should have been a simple task, except that the lock slot kept rising and falling, twisting left and right to get away from him.

He looked behind himself.

Teddy was still nowhere around.

There might still be time.

He jammed the key into the lock, more by accident than intent, twisted it and pushed the old-fashioned metal door open. The lights in the room beyond rose automatically, displaying a simple chair before a small round table in the center of the room. The single leg the table stood on was a foot in diameter. The top of the table was inlaid with bright keys, one for every letter of the alphabet, ten for numbers and combinations thereof, eighty-six others for various symbols— including monetary abbreviations, brackets, commas, periods, parentheses, scientific notations...

He sat in the cup-chair and leaned over the board, pressed the MESSAGE bar and watched the keys light up.

Still no Teddy.

Laboriously, he managed to key the first directive:

LOCK ALL *EXTERIOR* DOORS AND WINDOWS ON THE BOTTOM THREE LEVELS OF THE MANSION.

The wall across from him lighted abruptly, like a motion picture screen. Black letters blinked before him: DIRECTIVE OBEYED.

He typed: DO NOT OPEN ANY DOORS OR WINDOWS WITHOUT THE DIRECT COMMAND OF A HUMAN VOICE.

On the wall, it replied: MY SOUND RECEPTORS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

St. Cyr watched the keys dance up and down before his eyes, metamorphose into bright mushrooms, become keys again. He wondered if he could possibly afford to take a catnap; if he could knock off for half an hour, his head would be so much clearer when he woke.

He typed: DO NOT OPEN ANY DOORS OR WINDOWS WITHOUT BEING REQUESTED TO DO SO, MANUALLY, BY A MESSAGE PRECEDED BY THE CODE WORD—STALKER.

Flickering on the screen: YES, SIR.

St. Cyr: WITHOUT YOUR AUDIO RECEIVERS, CAN YOU IDENTIFY THE PASSENGER IN AN ELEVATOR?

NO, SIR.

He thought a minute, allowed the minute to stretch into a year, let it snap back into perspective again. He typed: CAN YOU DISTINGUISH BETWEEN A HUMAN AND A ROBOTIC ELEVATOR PASSENGER, WITHOUT YOUR EARS?

YES, SIR.

HOW?

ON GRAVPLATES, A ROBOT BRINGS NO WEIGHT TO BEAR ON THE ELEVATOR FLOOR, WHICH I MONITOR FOR SAFETY REASONS.

He typed: PERMIT NO ROBOT IN THE ELEVATORS.

YES, SIR.

He thought a moment, then added: ACCEPT NO PROGRAMMED COMMAND UNLESS IT IS PRECEDED BY THE CODE WORD—STALKER.

YES, SIR. PRECAUTION EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

He slumped back in his chair, closed his eyes and yawned. On the insides of his eyelids, the stalker approached him, hands raised to embrace him. He did not like the vision, and he opened his eyes again to be rid of it. He leaned forward and typed: DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THIS HOUSE?

No letters lighted on the wall.

He nodded, corrected the message: STALKER, DO YOU KNOW WHAT HAS HAPPENED IN THIS HOUSE?

THE MASTER UNIT HAS GONE—BERSERK.

He shut off the keyboard and got out of his chair, though he would have liked to remain there for a long while. He crossed the small room, locked the door behind him, pocketed the key. He stumbled through the workshop and across the garage to the elevator doors without encountering Teddy. Perhaps he had reached the programming board in time to keep the master unit locked out. Perhaps they were safe in their fortress.

He stepped into the pink mouth when the lips opened hungrily.

He was swallowed.

Spit up. Still too sour.

In the sitting room, he saw that the others had finished their desperate barricade of chairs, sofas, lamps, draperies, bookshelves and cocktail tables. They had wedged the debris into the frame of the broken window so tightly that a certain force would be required to smash through—thereby providing

them with some kind of warning.

Only Alicia was awake, fighting off the second phase of the drug's influence. She sat on a sofa, the only piece not worked into the window frame, watching over her family.

"It's done," he said.

Without feeling, as if she had to expend enormous energy to shape each word, Alicia said, "I thought you were dead."

"Not yet."

"Where would we be without you?"

"Happier?"

She shook her head back and forth, almost forgot to stop. "What you said needed to be said."

"Sleepy..." he protested.

"Lie down."

He lay down next to Tina and draped one arm across her narrow shoulders. She was warm. She was like a catalyst that brought the green-black nothingness sweeping over him.

SIXTEEN: *Advice*

Baker St. Cyr woke at two o'clock in the morning, sticky with perspiration, his heart pounding loudly in his ears, having just and barely escaped the cold embrace of the stalker on the broken road. The icy white fingers had actually brushed his cheek this time, the nails like polished stones as they raked gently through his hair. The touch had carried from sleep into the waking world, causing him to shiver uncontrollably.

"What's the matter?" Tina Alderban asked.

He opened his eyes and, for a moment, as he looked into her face, was terrified that the stalker had come out of the dream with him, had assumed a husk of flesh and blood. Then he realized that they were still lying on the floor, faces turned toward each other, and that his arm was still draped across her shoulder where he had put it before sinking into the drugged sleep. She was Tina, no one else.

"Nightmares," he said.

"Have them often?"

"All the time."

"The same one?"

Surprised at the question, he said, "Yes."

He removed his arm from her shoulders, for he felt that the price of that familiarity was going to be too steep for him to pay in terms of candidness and truth.

"What happened to the others?"

"See for yourself."

He sat up, wished that he had not, waited until the banging inside his skull settled into a more tolerable thumping, like a padded drumstick against a gong. He wiped at his cottony eyes and saw that the rest of the family was in much the same state as he was—except for Alicia and Hirschel, who appeared to be more fully recovered than anyone else.

"You were slow when the shooting started," Hirschel said. In his book, obviously, that was one of the worst things a man could be.

"I know," he said. "I guess it was the drug."

"No one else was so affected by it that they couldn't get off at least one burst," Hirschel insisted. He was not exactly angry—more *concerned* than anything.

"I was the first hit," St. Cyr reminded the hunter.

Hirschel shrugged and did not push the subject any more.

"What now?" Jubal asked. His words were slurred. He sat with Alicia on the couch, beside Dane, massaging his own temples in slow, circular movements of his fingertips. Dane looked thinner, darker, and more confused than ever. The superstitious folderol had been proved false, suddenly and

violently. He had not yet gotten used to facing reality.

"Now," St. Cyr said, "we find another room on this level, one that doesn't have any windows large enough for Teddy to break through."

"You think he's still outside the house?" Hirschel asked. Clearly, he did not think so.

St. Cyr explained the trek he had made down to the manual programming chamber and what he had accomplished there.

"I underestimated you again," the hunter said, smiling.

"But don't get your hopes up," St. Cyr said. "Teddy may have gotten back into the house before I issued those orders to the house computer."

"We'd have seen him before this," Jubal said.

"I doubt it. He knows that we have the vibra-guns. He's not going to attack straight-on unless he has absolutely no other choice. That's why I want to get us established in another room that can only be breached through a single door. We're going to limit his alternatives until he has no choice but to confront us at a disadvantage."

"If he's not in the house?" Jubal asked.

"Then we have an easy night ahead of us."

"He could kill the Worldwide Communications deliveryman and gain another day. Or, if it's a mechanical deliveryman, he could simply smash it up."

"No. The port office would wonder what had happened to their man. They'd try calling. Then they'd send someone else. If they lost two men in a couple of hours, the police would be swarming all over the mansion."

"The library has no windows and one door," Hirschel said. "That ought to be the kind of room you're looking for."

By a quarter of three that morning they had cycled open the library door, using the master key that St. Cyr had brought up from the basement—with the house computer "deaf," the locks could no longer be vocally coded—had left the door open as an invitation to the master unit, and had used books and furniture to form defended firing positions in the middle of the room. Then they had nothing to do but wait.

At twenty minutes past three in the morning, as they waited quietly in the library, Tina crept across the dimly lighted room and sat beside him where he was hunched behind an overturned writing desk. She said, "I have a suggestion to make."

"That is?"

"Take off the bio-computer shell."

"Now?"

Illogical.

"Yes. It almost caused your death once."

He grinned and looked away from the open door for a moment. He said, "How do you figure that?"

"You said yourself that you were so slow in recognizing the killer's identity only because the bio-computer kept rejecting the possibility of a robot criminal."

"But now it understands, has the data stored."

"The way I understand it," she said, "is that *you* have the data stored in your own brain cells. The bio-computer never retains any data beyond that which is put in it by the maker. It taps your own store of information, too, and makes use of that, but it never adds to its own."

"It's the same thing," he said.

"No, it isn't." She bit her lip, spoke rapidly, as if she were afraid he would stop her at any moment. "The bio-computer is programmed to reject in its considerations anything that appears to be unfactual, based on emotions. It might very well still reject the idea of a murderous robot."

"Where did you get all this theory on bio-computers?" he asked, glancing at the still-empty doorway, then back at the girl. Her eyes were terribly dark, beautiful.

She looked down at her delicate hands and said, 'I've been reading about them.'

"Recently?"

"Today."

"Where'd you get the information?"

She motioned at the books around them. "Here. There was more than enough. You know, too, that the fedgov has often thought of issuing injunctions against further sales or use of bio-computers?"

"Yes," he said. "But they're always twenty years behind the times. Give them a few more years and they will require bio-computer shells for all federal police."

She looked up again and leaned forward, as if putting the musculature of her fine small body behind the words: "There are times where cold, logical reasoning does not work as well as emotionalism."

Illogical.

"Name one time," he said.

She looked at her hands again. "Between us."

"I guess so," he said. "But we were talking about how best to solve a case, with or without a bio-computer. That's something different again. And I still say it's safer and easier wearing a shell."

"What is your repeating nightmare about?" she asked.

He was startled by the abrupt change of subject. He had gone from a topic he knew he could win to one that he had never understood. "I don't know," he said.

"Of course you do."

"I'm being chased down a broken road," he said. He hesitated, and then, keeping his eyes on the door, he told her the entire dream.

"Do you know what's behind it? Have you ever submitted to psychoanalysis?"

"No."

"Doesn't the bio-computer try to help you understand the nightmare?"

"It tries."

"And can't?"

"Can't," he said.

"Then that's because you won't let it. The bio-computer isn't a sentient creature itself, you know. It isn't even half of a symbiote, in the true sense of that word. It's just something you use, like a tool. If you wanted to know what that dream meant, the bio-computer could help you learn."

"You've done a great deal of reading, haven't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then you know about the paranoid spells."

She nodded. "When you think it's actually taking over your mind; when you have a feeling there's something physical and living crawling around inside of you."

"That's it," he said, shivering at the exactness of the description.

She shifted her position, crossed her lovely, slim legs in Indian fashion and leaned with her palms against the cool, supple mounds of her knees. "Surely, if you understand that those attacks are only paranoid, you can't be saying that they prove the bio-computer is, in fact, sentient."

For a while he did not answer. When he realized she was not going to leave, that she was waiting, he said, "Most of the time it *feels* as if I'm not alone, as if it's someone to be with, share with, live with."

"And you can't bear to be alone?"

"Can't at all."

She said, "Then there are alternatives to the bio-computer."

He looked at her, thinking that it was best to face each other honestly right now, looked quickly away when he saw what he thought were tears in the corners of her eyes. He wished that Teddy would arrive soon, so that he would have something to shoot at. He wanted to see the pulse of the laser and watch the destruction the sound made as the light carried it against and into the robot's shell. He felt that the gun could bleed away a nameless tension that had overtaken him.

He said, "The alternatives are worse, because they involve too much responsibility."

"There must be something pretty awful behind your nightmare," she said, "to make you the way you are now."

"How am I now?"

"Cold, distant."

"Look who's talking," he said.

He regretted the insult as soon as he had spoken, but he did not have the

will to retract it, even if it could be reeled back in and altogether forgotten.

She was hurt, but she tried not to show the hurt.

"You're right, of course. I'm the one who told you that in the first place. I feel cold, hollow, uncaring. But you were the one who was supposed to help me, to make me feel human, to warm me up. Do you think you ever can—so long as you're wearing that shell?" She answered her own question. "No, it just won't work. We'd have to be each other's crutch, or not at all."

As St. Cyr was framing his response, Teddy appeared in the library doorway and took a burst from Hirschel's vibra-rifle, square in the center of his body trunk.

SEVENTEEN: *More Than a Case Is Ended*

"You got him!" Dane shouted.

St. Cyr snapped, "Stay down!"

The boy dropped back behind a shelter made from a lounge chair and about a hundred hardbound volumes of popular Darmanian history which he had pulled from the shelves.

"I hit him square in the chest," Hirschel said. "But if the damage had been serious, he'd be lying there in the doorway. Do you see him?"

"No," Dane said sheepishly.

Tina was on her knees again, and she leaned close to St. Cyr to whisper, "May I stay here with you? I think this is a better firing position than the one I was in."

That was not the reason she wished to remain beside him, however. But he could not find heart to argue with her. "Stay," he said.

In the next instant Teddy shot through the doorway without warning, moving far faster than St. Cyr had ever imagined that he could. He had angled his body trunk ninety degrees from his gravplate mobility system, which was fitted under his base on a heavy ball joint. The result was that he came at them lying on his side, offering the smallest possible target. Even if they could snap a shot straight into his undercarriage, there were no mechanisms to be damaged, only the heavy ball joint that moved the gravplates, and this was too solid to succumb to a vibra-beam.

St. Cyr fired, missed.

"Look out!" Tina cried.

Teddy struck the writing desk behind which they were hiding, smashed through the top of it "feet first," showering splintered wood into the air, crumpling the piece of furniture like eggshell. His advance did not seem at all diminished by the collision. He struck St. Cyr's bad shoulder with nearly enough force to rip the detective's arm from its socket, then rocketed past, deeper into the library.

Hirschel fired, must have missed, and cursed.

Small hands pulled pieces of the desk from St. Cyr and brushed splinters from his face. "You all right?" Tina asked.

He blinked, nodded, and tried to sit up.

Across the room, Teddy soared to the high ceiling like a bat loose in a house, dropped behind Dane, leveled off and slammed hard into the boy as he turned to take aim with his pistol. Dane was tossed into the bookshelves as if he were made of clay; he got out one choked scream before he fell forward on his face. He might or might not be dead. Clearly, though, he was out of the

fight for good.

"My rifle," St. Cyr said.

Tina said, "It's smashed."

"Where's your pistol?"

She looked around, came up with it.

"Give it to me."

Hirschel scored a hit, fell and twisted away as the robot dived in towards him.

St. Cyr fired three times in rapid succession as the master unit, though still lying on its side, parallel to the floor, passed length-on to him, offering an excellent target. All three of the shots, the pulses of light showed, were wide of the mark.

"Terrible shooting," she said.

"My shoulder hurts like a bitch," he said. That much was perfectly true. But the excuse for such inexcusably bad marksmanship on the part of a professional rang hollow even in his own ear; he had pulled off those three bursts of fire *knowing* they were wide.

Teddy swung back on Hirschel just as the hunter gained his feet, struck his left hip and spun him violently around. Hirschel's knees caught on the arm of a chair and he went down hard, his head striking the back of the chair with a sickening dull thud. He did not move.

Teddy swung in St. Cyr's direction, located him and started forward at top speed.

St. Cyr shot, missed, shot again, fell to the side as the robot careened past.

"Give me the gun," Tina said, holding out a slim, brown hand.

St. Cyr pushed her rudely away as Teddy streaked back on them and passed within an inch of the spot where her head had been. He rolled, despite his throbbing shoulder, and fired again. The pulse of light, tattling on his bad shooting, passed two feet above the master unit.

What in hell was wrong?

For once, the bio-computer had no suggestion.

Foolishly, Jubal had picked up a chair and was crossing the room in quick, heavy steps, brandishing the impossible weapon as if he could frighten the robot away with the threat of a severe beating.

"Get back. Stay down!" St. Cyr called.

Jubal could not hear him, or did not want to. Perhaps, in this useless display of bravery, he hoped to cancel out everything that St. Cyr had said to him in the last several hours; wipe out his wife's and his daughter's agreement with that judgment; prove that, after all, he *could* care about someone besides himself, something else besides his art.

Teddy rose, dived, leveled out and smashed the chair from the old man's hands, sending him tumbling backwards. He landed in a heap at his wife's feet. Alicia bent over him and patted his face. She seemed almost too calm as she pointedly ignored the chaos around her—and when it was all over, if she

were somehow still alive, she would most likely have some screaming to do.

"Give me that gun!" Tina insisted.

"Stay down," St. Cyr said. "Or get out of here." He ignored her reaching hand and got clumsily to his feet. He did not dare look at his shoulder. The pain was bad enough. He did not want to have to match the pain with the sight of all that blood from the opened wound. Somehow he twisted fast enough to avoid Teddy's next pass, turned and stumbled into the rows of ceiling-high bookshelves that paralleled the rear wall of the room and took up a third of the chamber's space. He leaned against a shelf of mystery novels and tried to regain his breath and at least some of his nerve. He had to be calm, because he simply had to shoot better.

A moment later Teddy found him. The master unit soared into the far end of the aisle between the books, struck straight for St. Cyr's chest. When the cyberdetective fell to avoid being battered to death, the robot checked its forward speed with surprising rapidity, curved up and to the right to avoid ploughing disastrously into the stone wall behind the wood paneling, and smashed noisily through the shelving and bound volumes on that side. It burst into the second aisle, which paralleled the first, in a rain of torn paper and splintered wood.

Tina appeared at the end of the first passage and shouted, "Baker!"

"Get out of here."

She started towards him.

"For God's sake, run!"

Teddy exploded through the books and shelving again, destroying a good portion of the library's collection of 20th-century American authors, oblivious of any possibility of damage to his own mechanisms, then dropped at St. Cyr like a stone.

Tina screamed.

St. Cyr tried to run.

Instead of crushing his skull down to his kneecaps as it had intended, the master unit glanced off his good shoulder and sent him tumbling like a clown. Full-length on the floor of the aisle, both shoulders jammed full of intensely hot pins, St. Cyr wondered why he had not yet tried to shoot the robot while it was limited in its maneuvers by the dimensions of the aisle.

A robot is harmless property.

He's a killer.

Illogical.

St. Cyr rolled, trying to make up for lost time, and nearly ground his teeth down to the gums in a single instant as pain cascaded through him like a torrent through a suddenly opened sluice gate. He fired straight up at the machine as it dived like a hammer for his head, chewed on what was left of his teeth, and rolled again.

He had missed.

A robot is harmless, valuable property.

Bullshit.

Useless emotion.

St. Cyr scrambled across the aisle, wriggled through the lowest shelf, pushing the books ahead of him into the next passageway. He crossed that and was into the third before Teddy smashed through the shelving after him.

"Baker!"

He looked around, could not see her.

He ran to the end of the aisle as Teddy smashed through from the second and soared after him.

"Baker, where are you?"

"Get out, dammit!"

He had forgotten Teddy, listening to her call. He sensed the imminence of disaster a second before it was to happen, threw himself to the left, screamed as his wounded shoulder caught the edge of a shelf. Teddy boomed through the place he had been standing.

"Baker!"

He pushed through the books into the fourth aisle, squirmed through another low shelf into the fifth and last passageway. He was not as upset by the blank wall facing him as he should have been; for a long moment there, he had wondered if there would be an end to the aisles or if he had accidentally entered some unimaginably subtle purgatory in which the books went on and on forever.

No door here, though. Well, he had specified a room with only one entrance...

Somewhere farther back, toward the front of the room, Teddy tore another hole in the neatly racked books. A weakened shelf sighed as nails pulled slowly free, screeched abruptly like a stepped-on cat, and collapsed with a roar of spilled knowledge.

The house computer had referred to Teddy as a berserker. At the time, that had not been exactly true, for the master unit had been operating on a set of carefully laid plans. Now, however, when his plans had fallen through, he was indeed a berserker. Apparently, when Walter Dannery programmed the robot for murder, he thought to place in it a final directive to take precedence in a crisis: *If all else fails, throw caution to the wind, attack and destroy.*

Three hundred and fifty pounds of master unit traveling at twenty miles an hour—say only ten or fifteen miles an hour in the confines of the room—generated how much force, how much impact, how much potential for destruction? Too goddamned much. Shortly, there would not be any aisles in which to hide.

Books slapped to the floor again as shelving protested, splintered, and fell down before the robot.

Tina screamed.

Another crash.

Books fluttering like birds.

"Baker, help me!"

St. Cyr ran to the end of the aisle and, keeping to the wall, ran past the succeeding passageways, looking quickly into each. He found both the girl and the robot in the second corridor. She had fallen in a mound of crumpled books and seemed to have twisted her ankle. The master unit was completing a turn, right in front of St. Cyr, that would take it back towards her in one last deadly plunge.

"Baker!"

She had seen him.

He fired at the master unit, missed.

He damned the bio-computer that was attached to him, knew that he had no time to stop, calmly deactivate it, wait for the filaments to leave his body, unplug it and put it down. She would be dead by then.

"Here!" he shouted.

He tossed the gun to her. It glanced off a shiny-backed book by her hand and clattered across the floor, stopping a dozen feet behind her.

"Hurry!" he shouted.

She turned and scrambled after the weapon, slipped, fell, pushed up, reached, had it.

Teddy started after her.

Suddenly St. Cyr knew that she would not have enough time to stop it. Teddy could take the vibra-beam long enough to slam brutally into her and pass on by her broken body. And as abruptly as that realization came, so came the breakdown in the wall of his psyche, the wall that had shielded him from certain portions of the past for a long, long time now. In that instant he knew who the stalker in his nightmare was, remembered Angela, remembered her face in death, saw dark hair and dark eyes, saw her metamorphose into Tina... He screamed and lunged forward, leapt for the robot that had already begun to move away from him.

Luckily, his hands caught under what would have been a chin if it were human; he tried to drag it backwards, like a child wrestling with a dog three times his size.

Teddy swiveled his head, attempted to wrench free of the detective, his angle of approach to Tina shifting as he failed.

Tina had turned and was holding the pistol before her in both hands. Like a caveman who thinks he can beat an armored tank with nothing more than a slingshot, thought St. Cyr as he rode the silver robot.

A robot is harmless, valuable property.

St. Cyr's weight sufficiently deflected the master unit, sent it into the shelves beside the girl, where books had already been spilled. It brushed her skirt, nothing more.

Teddy tried to climb now; he rose a dozen feet, lifting the detective free of the floor.

St. Cyr's battered arms were so strained and bleeding that they had gone

numb. He just hoped that the paralysis did not creep into his hands and force him to relinquish his hold on the master unit. How long could the damn thing go on like this? It was feeding a good bit of energy into its gravplate mobility-system to be able to perform like this. Its batteries couldn't last forever without a recharge from the house generator. No matter what happened to his arms, he could surely hold out longer than Teddy...

Smoothly, Teddy's arms raised, bent backwards in an impossibly complex movement that was no strain at all on the special ball joints and the double-elbow lever system. The steel fingers closed around St. Cyr's wrists and squeezed.

He screamed, kicked, but held on.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Tina had moved and was sighting on the plate that covered the majority of the robot's control terminals.

Teddy shifted his grip on St. Cyr's left hand and carefully broke that thumb in one clean jerk.

Tina fired.

Teddy methodically broke the little finger on the same hand, where the thumb hung like a rag. St. Cyr let go with that arm, blackness bubbling up inside of him. Yet he would not let go with his other arm.

Tina fired again—three short, quick bursts.

Teddy was slammed sideways into the bookshelves, dragging the detective with him. St. Cyr felt a sharp thrust of broken shelving pierce his thigh.

Tina stepped closer and shot again.

Teddy hissed, squawked as he changed voice tapes in a desperate attempt to put together a few last words, perhaps some last epithet that Dannery had programmed into him. He could not do it. The hiss died with a pop, like a balloon exploding under the sharp jab of a pin, and the robot fell to the floor twelve feet below, landing on top of the cyberdetective, who had not let go. Teddy was finished.

And so am I, St. Cyr thought.

Emotional nonsense.

Blackness bubbled completely over him. This time, instead of a nightmare there was a pleasant warmth, soft light, Angela and Tina standing before him with their arms outstretched. He went to be with them forever.

EIGHTEEN: *A New Life*

Whirring.

Clicking.

Lights, no shapes.

Warmth, the smell of honey, cold metal fingers—

—terror, a sting, relaxation, sleep.

Different lights.

A woman's face: Angela? Tina?

No nightmares.

Sleep...

No nightmares.

Soft covers.

A hand on his forehead...

He opened his eyes and looked at Tina Alderban, smiled when she smiled, and tried to speak. His voice was not a voice, just the slide of stones down a rough plank.

"Water?" she asked.

He nodded.

She brought a glass of water, watched him drink, took it out of his trembling hands when he was finished. "How do you feel?"

"Okay." He settled back against the pillow, frowned and said, "No, not okay, pretty terrible."

She leaned into him and, her voice intense, her words clipped and strained, she said, "I want to destroy your bio-computer shell. I want your permission to grind it into little pieces."

He felt his chest and realized he was not wearing the shell.

He said, "Costs money."

"I'll buy it from you, whatever it costs."

He seemed to remember something and, working his sour mouth, he said, "What happened to the others?"

"Later," she insisted. "First, tell me if I can have the bio-computer."

"Are they dead?"

"The bio-computer," she said, setting her mouth in a tight line.

He sighed, sank back. "Take it," he said.

She leaned forward and kissed him, holding his face in her small hands, nicking her tongue along his lips.

"My breath is awful," he said.

She chuckled. "It's not bad at all."

He smiled and yawned.

"Sleepy?"

He nodded.

"Sleep, then."

He did, drifting into a peaceful darkness where there were no nightmares anymore.

The next time he woke, hours later, he was more himself than he had been the first time. Tina was sitting in a chair next to his bed, reading, and he sat up to have a better look at her.

"Whoa, easy," she said, dropping the book and urging him to lie back and rest.

"Have the police been here yet?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning," she said.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"A day and a half."

He rubbed at his eyes as if the events of those hours lay there in a colorful powder. "The others?"

"Dane had several broken ribs and a punctured lung. He's going to be all right now. Hirschel has a skull fracture and a broken hip, but he's coming along nicely thanks to the autodoc and the speedheal potions. Jubal—Father suffered a broken arm and was otherwise only bruised and cut." She sat on the edge of the waterbed, hooked the black wealth of her hair over her ears to keep it from falling across her face. "You had a dislocated shoulder, two broken fingers, two broken ribs, a broken ankle, and too many lacerations to properly count. A few more days in bed, with speedheal, and you ought to be up and around."

He looked down at the lumpy bandages and nodded. "Dannery...?"

"He's going to be arrested on Ionus tomorrow morning, when the light-telegram from Inspector Rainy can be acted on. I opened the packet of information you got from Talmud Associates. It's pretty thorough on Dannery. His wife *was* seriously ill. In fact, partly because of the transfer from Darma to Ionus, she died. That unhinged him the rest of the way, I suppose."

"Has Jubal seen the information?"

"Yes," she said. "I don't know how it affected him. He turned white and was very upset when he finished the part about Dannery's wife. But I don't know if he really understands what happened and how much of it is his responsibility."

Then: silence.

"Water?" he asked a few minutes later.

She got it. When he had finished drinking, she said, "Can you tell me about Angela?" When he looked surprised, she said, "You were calling for her—and sometimes for me—just after we took you out of the autodoc." When he hesitated, she tried to help him find a place to start. She said, "Is she pretty?"

"She was. She's dead."

"I'm sorry."

He said, "Not as sorry as I am. I killed her."

"I don't believe that. You aren't a murderer."

"Not directly, perhaps." Slowly, haltingly, he told her about the honeymoon, the leisurely tour of Earth, his refusal to use a master unit to drive their car, his own incompetence on the mountain road, on the slick pavement... the spin... rails breaking... the car rolling... metal screeching, popping, twisting up like rubber... her blood running down his hands as he pulled her through the shattered window... her unseeing eyes...

When he was done, Tina said, "You must have loved her very much."

"Too much to live with the memory."

"I look like her, don't I?"

"A little."

"Is that the reason—you're interested in me?"

"Not the sole reason," he said.

"I destroyed the bio-computer shell."

"How?"

"I smashed its undersides with a hammer, then fed it down the garbage chute, where it'll be compressed into a tiny cube."

He smiled and took her hand in his unbandaged hand. "That's quite violent for a demure young lady. I'm sure it must have been satisfying, but what am I going to do for a living now?"

"You'll be my crutch," she said. "You'll make me care."

"You once thought that was impossible."

"Maybe I've changed my mind—and maybe I've already begun to care, just a little."

He patted the waterbed. "Come here, lie down."

"I don't think you're in any condition for that," she said.

"Neither do I. I just want to have you beside me, to put my arm around—if I can."

She stretched out on the mattress and turned against him, curled in the hollow under his shoulder and put her cheek against his chest. For a long while he lay like that, looking at her black hair, which starred with points of blue light from the ceiling lamp and became, in his mind, the deep and beautiful flow of space where suns and worlds and possibilities were limitless.

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